Benefits of Old Laws
by ulktante

Summary

Parts of souls do not go on alone. When Voldemort returns to a body he is much more sane than before and realizes that he cannot go on as he started. Finding some old laws he sets out to reach his goals on another way. Harry will find his world turned upside down once more and we will see how people react when the evil is not acting how they think it should.

Notes

I have this work published on FFnet under the same name and title. I was asked to post it here as well, because some of the features of the side make reading it easier. I'm not sure how fast I can get all currently existing 47 chapters uploaded here. But if I don't edit too much (for errors etc.) it should probably take not too long. If you want to read the rest before it his here you can look over at FFnet ;)

Update 17th of May 2017: I have uploaded all chapters currently in existence and will keep in pace with the Updates as I do over at FFnet. If you are curious when the next update will be look at the bottom notes of the last chapter available. I always post my planned update date there.

The idea to this story I got from a story I read on FFnet, some time back. It was “The Slytherin Law” written by The-Girl-Who-Wrote-This. And as the story would not leave me...
alone I started to write a version of my own.
Severus Snape, Potions Master and teacher at Hogwarts, was on his way back to the school. He was only limping slightly and was oddly relieved and concerned at the same time that he was back so soon. It was still dark, only the middle of the night and not the early morning hours he was expecting to be struggling his way back to the castle doors and to the infirmary.

He was relieved because he was still alive. His death was one of the possible outcomes of the stupidly brave but necessary endeavour he had undertaken tonight. And the concern... well, the things that were spoken this evening in the last hours were definitely a reason to be concerned. He sighed as he finally reached the big doors into the castle. The grounds were empty, no sign left from the masses of people and the commotion that accompanied the last task of the blasted tournament that brought back what should have stayed lost.

He opened the doors and stepped into the entrance hall, composing himself on the way back up to the Headmaster's office. Briefly he contemplated to go to his quarters and change out of the Death Eater robes first, but time was of the essence, and if he hoped for a few hours of sleep tonight, than he had better not dwaddle.

“Candyfloss” Albus and his ridiculous passwords. Warily, Severus stepped on the spiral staircase and contrary to his normal behaviour, he waited until it brought him up to the door to the Headmaster's office. A short knock and a friendly “Come in” later, Severus stood inside the warm and cozy circular office.

“Severus, my boy! I did not think you would be back so soon.” surprise was colouring Albus' face and voice. “Did you need to run? Are you hurt?” Concern was the most prominent emotion in the blue eyes, but Severus was almost certain he could also see some calculating in their depths. And there he was again, the manipulator behind the grandfatherly façade. The man that pressured him with guilt into working as a spy, the man that never failed to remind him of his errors and his losses.

“I am quite fine, Headmaster. No need to worry.” Severus took a moment to look to Minerva, who was sitting in a chair by the desk and was looking really tired. Besides her, the office was empty. She looked up and seemed relieved to see the Potions Master.

“Can you tell us what you learned this evening?” Dumbledore motioned for Severus to take the other seat in front of his desk.

“Mr. Potter's description of the Dark Lord, was accurate.”, he sat in the offered chair. “He does not look human anymore. As I learned, this is the result of a mistake made by Pettigrew during the preparation of the potion that was used this evening.” He declined Minerva's silent offer of tea and sat back, trying to get more comfortable. “The Dark Lord wants me to find the error and a cure to rectify the damage done. He told me to stay here till the end of term, and stay with him after that. I was not told anything else.”

“Nothing more?” Albus seemed disappointed by this brief report “He did not speak of his plans? You did not see any of the others? Where does he stay?”

Before Severus could start to answer, Minerva rose from her chair “I will go to bed. I can’t help
here, and we have to care for the students.”

She brushed her fingers over the shoulder of her younger colleague “I’m glad that you are well.” With that, she left the office, closing the door softly behind her.

Severus breathed deeply. “I have seen none of the others. And the Dark Lord did not speak of plans that did not concern me. He may have accepted my explanation... at least enough not to kill me on the spot. But I do not think that he trusts me completely at the moment.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his closed eyes. There was a headache forming. “We meet at Malfoy Manor. But I doubt that he will stay there. There were not many words spoken. It will take time to get his trust once more. I am glad that I could leave His presence alive.” He sounded tired, almost as tired as he felt.

“I will have to prepare for my stay away from the school. We will see if I will be able to gather worthwhile information in the next weeks. But now I will go down to my quarters and will try to sleep a little.” He stood and nodded in the Headmaster's direction, spun on his heel and limped out of the door.

The first thing Severus did down in his quarters was to get out of his Death Eater robes, tossing them carelessly over a chair. He sank down in his favourite chair opposite the fireplace, lighted a fire, and summoned one vial of a deep purple potion to his hand. He broke the wax seal and knocked the potion back. It tasted foul, but the tremors almost immediately lessened. Over the months as the Dark Mark became darker and darker again, he had decided to stock up on doses of his anti-crucio draught. Now he was glad he had found the time to do so.

He let his head sink back and closed his eyes. What should he do? There was an oath to protect Lily's child. There was Dumbledore and his guilt trips. There was a returned Dark Lord, whom he had not seen this sane in all the time he had known him.

There were not many options. And there was even less time.

He had told Albus only a fraction of what had transpired between the Dark Lord and himself in Lucius’ manor. The Dark Lord said that he was almost certain, that he had lost Severus’ loyalty that night he killed Lily Potter. That he understood the reasons of why his potions master stayed with Dumbledore and why it was so easy for him to get a trusted position with the Order of the Phoenix. Severus let his hand glide through his black hair.

It seemed that the Dark Lord did suspect that he had been actively working for the light in the last war. That his loyalty was with the light and not the dark any more.

He did not tell Dumbledore that his spy had a date of expiry. That he had until the end of August to come to a decision. Go to the Dark Lord, take a potion that would render his Occlumency useless, and than let the Dark Lord wander his mind. Or stay away, declare that he was no longer loyal, and be a hunted man.

Neither of this options was one he would chose. But not to chose was impossible. He did not want to die. And both options would lead to his death. Either because he would break his oath to protect
Lily’s child to the best of his abilities, or because he would be hunted as a traitor. Like Karkaroff, the coward that ran.

Maybe there was still hope, though. The Dark Lord only cast the cruciatus curse once. And he had been talking very logical and clear. No grandstanding, no detours or mad jumps between topics. A declaration he intended to win Severus fully back, that he trusted him enough to brew a cure for him. Maybe there was hope, that it was possible to go back to the dark, while still protecting that blasted Potter brat.

Severus groaned, thinking on this more tonight would not help him. There was still a week of school, and he would have to prepare for his “holidays”, there was much to do, and he would not get all done that needed to be done, if he denied himself the much needed sleep.

He got up and padded over the carpeted floor to his bedroom and the connected bathroom. A hot shower would do him good.

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At the same time, in another part of the country, a white peacock was peacefully strutting through a beautiful garden, watched by the crimson eyes of the recently resurrected Dark Lord Voldemort.

He held an empty potions vial in his hands, idly spinning it between his fingers. That was the second pain relief potion he had taken that night. Hopefully he would not need to continue to take one every few hours.

There was a knock on the door, and he spun around calling “Come in” as he did so.

The door opened, and Lucius stepped through, bowing deeply once he was inside the study.

“Tell me, what is the reaction to Potter's report in the Ministry?” Voldemort asked and watched the current Lord Malfoy with interest.

“Fudge is in denial. He will not believe that Potter is telling the truth. He told me what Dumbledore tried to make him do.” The blond Lord's face morphed to a smirk. “To Remove control over Azkaban from the Dementors, to send envoys to the giants, tell everyone. He even told me, that Snape showed his arm in his face, forcing him to step back.” Lucius face got cautious at that, but the nodding of his Lord’s head showed him that this was no news to him. “I do not think that there will be a problem from this side in the next time. They are all in severe denial. And as the saying goes, there is no one as blind as those that won't see.”

“How does he explain the death of this other boy? Diggory?” asked Voldemort, cautiously sitting down in the plush seat behind the desk and setting the empty vial down in front of him.

“He claims that one of the monsters in the maze of the last task got to him.”

“What about Bartemius? Any word about him?” he was getting tired again, he needed to rest soon. But first he had some questions to asks and tasks to give out.

Lucius was standing, trembling slightly, in front of his own desk and tried to not show his pain, fear and weariness “He left the castle right after Potter came back. He deemed it too dangerous to stay, too big a risk.” He shuffled his feet “I got a floo call from Benjamin Nott, saying that he
“Very well”, he closed his eyes for a moment, just a few orders and he could lie down until morning. “I want information about how many witches and wizards are currently living in Britain. Get me the expected size of next year’s first-year class at Hogwarts. How many of the children will be from muggle homes? How many married couples are there, that are capable and likely to get more children in the next years? Every bit of information you can get on the status of our population” He waited for a nod before he continued “Begin to research old laws, and all you can find about conditions to take up the mantle of Lord Slytherin. And if there could be a possible way for me to integrate myself with the ‘law abiding citizens’ of this fine country.”

Lucius seemed perplexed for a moment about his last comment and the sarcasm in the last words, but bowed again “Of course, my Lord. Am I allowed to get help from one of the others?”

“Yes. I want this information as soon and as fast as possible. Try to stay unnoticed.” Voldemort stood once again. “Call an elf to show me my rooms.”

“As you wish my Lord. Tally!”

A young elf in a crisp white pillowcase with the Malfoy crest embroidered on it popped into the study and bowed to both wizards. “How can Tally help her master?”

>Show our Lord to his rooms and get him everything he might need or ask for.”

At this order Tally bowed again, so that her long ears brushed over the parquet “If Masters Master would follow Tally.”

They all left the study. Voldemort to rest and hopefully sleep, despite the pain that was sure to resurface soon, and Lucius to distribute the orders for information-gathering to the others. He was sure that the information about the next first-year class had to be somewhere in his papers. The number of possible candidates was send to the governors every year around this time.

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

Not sure if my formatting will be preserved as this sides works differently than FFnet does.
Alongside happiness about the fast approaching long holidays, worry was one of the dominant emotions in Hogwarts this last week before the end of the school year.

The Headmaster was worrying about the safety of all the students of his school, both those that were muggle-borns and those who had parents who were servants of Voldemort. He was concerned for the first for being targeted by Death Eaters, and the last because it was likely that they would be pressured to become Death Eaters themselves, or would be witnesses to some horrible actions over the summer holidays. He was worrying about how many would die or become orphans, how many would suffer. But he distanced himself from those worries. He had learned a long time ago that he could not worry over individuals, so he did not lose sight of what needed to be done, so that in the end the best outcome for the whole could be achieved.

And so he focused on contacting old friends and allies and everyone he could think of who might be convinced that Voldemort was indeed back once more. On getting the Order back on track to hinder the Death Eaters and their master in every way possible.

Severus was worrying too. As the Head of House Slytherin he worried about his students. The bullying they would be subjected to from the other Houses once the return of the Dark Lord became public knowledge. The political pressure those belonging to more neutral or light families would experience over the next weeks and months. How he could get those not wishing to participate in their parents’ actions, out of the pinch they were sure to land in. Shortly said, how he could keep the children in his care safe.

He was worrying about his own future too. Would he live to see the next school year? If he did not, who would protect his students? Could he live as a man on the run? He did not know the answers to those questions and tried not to linger too long on them. It would do him no good, after all. And so he focused on going through all his books in the search for anything that might be useful in the task to give a resurrected wizard a human body once more. Often he could be seen on the way to or from the restricted section of the library, and the collection of books in his quarters grew with each trip into Madam Pince’s domain.

Harry was worrying mostly about the future. The immediate future, and his stay at the Dursleys’ this summer especially. He thought that they probably would be more unpleasant than in previous years after the fiasco with the fireplace the last summer. And the memorable tongue toffee incident. But as this was quite normal by now and something Harry could plan for – the Dursleys were not known for being creative – these worries were not the most prominent in Harry’s thoughts.

No, his imagination was running wild with the possibilities, now that Voldemort was back. As the Ministry did not believe Harry, did not want to believe, he worried how many people would be hurt or killed before they realized that they needed to be careful. How many of his fellow students, how many of his friends would get between him and Voldemort? He was afraid that more of them would get in the way and killed.
And so he stayed away from most of the other students, only spending time with Ron and Hermione, and Hagrid once in a while. Everyone tried to tell him that Dumbledore would find a solution, that he would be safe. But Harry did not really believe them.

Hermione and Ron worried, mostly for their friend Harry, but Hermione was also worrying about the exams and her parents – she was not sure what to tell them, or if she should tell them anything at all – and Ron about his brothers and Ginny.

And so everyone had his or her own worries as the last days of term passed by.

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The cosy seating area in Lucius Malfoy's study was prepared for a meeting. Tea was ready and placed with fine bone china on the low table with inlays that showed a field of flowers. There were little sandwiches and pastries, and one cup and plate for each of the expected guests. One of the chairs around the oval table had been transfigured into a more extravagant version. It had green silk cushions, instead of the dark brown velvet ones, and was carved in a way that reminded of scales and snakes in places along the armrests.

Narcissa was checking for a last time that all was perfect. She did not dare to risk angering the Dark Lord residing in their home, so shortly before the school year ended and her only child would return for the summer holidays. She was rearranging the biscuits, again, as she heard the door to the study opening behind her. She turned and bowed low as she saw the Dark Lord entering the study, followed by her husband and some of the other Death Eaters.

"Thank you, Narcissa," spoke the Dark Lord, nodding his head in her direction. "Do not let us keep you from preparing for Draco's return." At this clearly dismissive statement Narcissa curtsied to her Lord trying and failing to not seem to be hurrying out of the room. Marvolo, as he had come to think of himself in the last week, tried not to limp on the way to his seat at the table. While the others followed and found seats for themselves, the Dark Lord lowered himself cautiously. He had punished Peter more than once in the last few days for his mistakes with the potion. And while the rat's screams were something he did like to hear, they did nothing to alleviate the pains caused by the incorrectly brewed potion. He still needed pain potions to be able to sleep at night. He really hoped that Severus would be able to find a cure and that he would be able to gain his loyalty once again.

They settled down, taking pastries or sandwiches and preparing their tea as each of them liked it. The Dark Lord let his eyes wander over his followers. Lucius had recovered from his punishment for losing his Lord's diary. In hindsight, Marvolo thought it was rather fortunate that Lucius had tried to get rid of it and tried to take a nuisance down at the same time. Had the blond not given the diary to the youngest Weasley, it would not have been destroyed, in the process freeing the largest part of his soul. And without this he might still be insane and bent on destruction, straying farther from his goals.

Benjamin Nott, the only son of his … maybe he should start calling those that had gone to school with him friends … old friend, took another pastry and tried to appear relaxed, even though he was
quite tense. The same went for Avery, Macnair, and the older Lestrange... well, maybe not him. As one of his … friends, he was better at reading him and knowing that there was no real danger at the moment.

Marvolo took a bite from a sandwich – and it was a very good one – and settled a little more into his chair. Setting the remaining portion of the sandwich down, he looked to Benjamin and Lucius “What have you two found?”

Lucius started talking as Benjamin just took a sip from his cup. “We did indeed find an old law that could be beneficial in the current circumstances.” He picked up a piece of parchment he had laid down on the table and reached across to hand it to his Lord.

“In the early 1300's there was a Potions Master that tricked several witches to drink a potion that made them lose their bodies. He then proceeded to force their spirits into bodies he created for them,” here he made a face of distaste “Bodies sewn together from animal parts, or so the sources claim.” Lucius' display of disgust was shared by all the others assembled around the table.

“However, what is of interest for us is the law made in the aftermath of these occurrences. To help the victims of this madman, a law was created stating that everyone that was forced from their bodies and regained a body of their own once more, should not be held accountable for what they did before gaining the new body.”

Marvolo’s brow rose at this explanation. That seemed indeed to be usable. He glanced at the copy of the law and its translation on the parchment.

“Originally it was to help the witches after they were freed and restored to human bodies again, so they would not be held responsible for the things done while in the fabricated bodies and under the influence of that wizard. But it is worded vaguely enough to be adaptable to your situation, my Lord.”

After a questioning look from the Dark Lord in the direction of Benjamin Nott, the brown haired man in dark brownish robes nodded. “I have read all we could find of all cases in which this law was used, and checked for possible problems. Everyone that was a bodiless spirit for any length of time and got a new human body after that can call on this law, to start fresh. The witches were considered to be newborns, free of everything they had or had not done before being reborn.” He looked at his hands and back up again. “They will probably change the law once you use it, my Lord, but they will not be able to hinder you in starting fresh, if you gain a human body again.”

Amusement flittered over the Dark Lord's face. “I see where my current body might not be counted as human at the moment. I have Severus working on that.” He laid the parchment with the law gently on the table and took the time to take a good sip from his tea. “So, there is a way to get me back into the world without anyone of the Ministry or Dumbledore's men being able to do anything about it.” Nodding all around the table was his silent answer. “Good.” He shifted his gaze to Xerxes Lestrange, whose hair was getting decidedly grey with age. “I will have to change residence. You or Benjamin are obvious choices for me to reside with after being reborn anew.”

That declaration shocked Lucius, who started to protest and rise from his chair but was interrupted by Voldemort with a sharp gesture with his hand “Say, Lucius, and be honest. Would you let someone reside in your house that placed you under the Imperius curse and forced you to commit numerous crimes?”

Lucius sank back in his chair after jumping to his feet to protest. He was thinking fast, trying to find the right answer to escape a round under the Cruciatus curse. The last aches from his punishment for the lost diary had just left him the day before. “No, I would not risk the safety of my son or wife.” he stiffened in anticipation and looked up, surprised when no curse hit him.
“So I cannot stay in your manor if we are to keep up the stories many of you told after my unlucky encounter with the Potter child.” A pointed look from Marvolo had them all cringing in their chairs for a few seconds.

“We will have to wait on this for Severus to find a way to make my appearance human once more. But tell me, what did you find on the state of our population?”

As he had suspected, the classes at Hogwarts had been smaller since the war, and the ratio of pure-blooded children to those with only one magical parent or even muggles as parents was shifting more and more to the latter. And the trend for the future was not looking up. Most of the pureblood families had only one, at the most two children. And the reasons were varied. The Malfoys had decided not to try for a second child because their standing was unstable at best. Benjamin Nott had only this one son, because his wife died shortly after Theodore was born, and he did not want to search for another wife... if one suitable could even be found. Others were not capable of getting more children, like the Longbottoms, or were simply dead like the Potters and many others. A lot of the people that should be parents right now were dead, fallen on both sides in the last war.

“It seems that getting me to be a respected part of the law abiding population is the best way forward.” He was growing tired again. Time to wrap this meeting up and send his followers out on another mission.

“Excuse me, my Lord, but why do you want to place so many restrictions upon yourself? Why can’t we continue as we were doing?” Macnair seemed truly confused, and he had to be to question his Lord in so blunt a way.

The Dark Lord looked rather pensive for a moment, toying with his wand, and Macnair paled to an ashen colour. “It is quite simple. We cannot afford to lose any more witches and wizards. Another outright war, and we may succeed in removing ourselves from the face of earth.”

Macnair gulped audibly and got white as a sheet at his Lord's next words. “If you think this to be a good plan, we can always start with you, Walden.”

That of course had not been Macnair's intention and he hurriedly assured the Dark Lord that he knew best, and Macnair would never dare question him.

The rest of the meeting was quite productive, and after a few more hours the Death Eaters left, each of them with a new mission. It seemed that for once Marvolo’s plans were going to work out.

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

If anyone wants to add speculations or suggestions, I welcome all constructive comments :}
Followed by his trunk, Severus made his way up the short walk from the gates through the lush garden up to the front door of Nott House. It was a nice building, not as grand as Malfoy Manor, but of exquisite quality and homely looking nonetheless.

Yesterday the students had returned home for the summer, and, as ordered, the Potions Master was on his way to his Lord’s side. He concentrated on his breathing to slow his heart, which wanted to beat frantically in worry and fear. Instead of concentrating on everything that could go wrong, the dark haired and eyed wizard directed his thoughts to the prospect of searching for a cure. Finding the error that had caused the ancient potion to have the effect it had, and searching for an antidote, promised to be an exciting and rewarding task. Work like this was what he had hoped for as he had studied for his Mastery.

On reaching the door he took the intricate knocker, fashioned in the form of a merperson, and made his presence known with three sharp knocks on the door. Only seconds later the door of dark wood swung inwards, and a small elf, clad in a tunic made out of two tea towels knotted on its shoulders, peered out and then bowed to the man in front of the door.

“You is expected, Potions Master sir. Please come in and follow Toppy.”

He did as asked and stepped through the door into the well lit and cheerful coloured hall. House Nott was not as one would envision the hiding place of a dark lord. But as Benjamin was a rather romantic man, he had kept everything exactly as his late wife had decorated the house and its rooms. And she had been a cheerful person, loving bright colours and harmony in her surroundings.

Severus followed the elf along a hallway to the back of the house to the more private rooms. She opened the last door on the left, bowed to the Potions Master and motioned him inside.

“This is to bes your potions lab, master's master said. Toppy shall take your things to your room?” The elf looked questioning at the still floating trunk obviously thinking that his clothes were within it. And in a way she was right.

Severus sat the trunk gently down just inside the room before looking around properly. Opening the trunk, he took a small satchel from atop the many books and scrolls inside and handed it to the waiting elf. It bowed and vanished, giving the curious wizard the opportunity to study his working place for the next while.

It had been a small sitting room, once upon a time. The furniture had been replaced with worktables which had granite tops, shelves filled with jars both of glass and clay and, by the look of them, crystal as well. There had been a ventilation system installed, and one rack held cauldrons of different sizes and materials. He even spotted a small golden cauldron and one that was seemingly made from a grey stone. As he got nearer to the shelves with ingredients he felt a ward around them, probably to make sure any mishaps in the middle of the room would not cause the jars to break or fall and make the mess even worse. There was a small window with some dark curtains, so that he would have access to sunlight if he wished, but could make the room pitch black if needed.
After the short round around the room, where he noted satisfied that all commonly used ingredients and many rare ones were present, he stepped up to the worktable that had some parchment and assorted other things sitting on top.

He sat down on the high stool by the table and looked at the neatly arranged objects. The parchment held the recipe to a very complicated potion with a lengthy brewing process, written in a neat, flowing cursive that was easy to read and that Severus had not seen before. He set the parchment down again and picked up one of the vials to take a closer look. It had a label reading *potion remnants* in the same script as the recipe and was filled with some cloudy, milky-blue potion that seemed to be of a watery consistency.

Then there was a scroll with the same recipe in Latin, but with some notes as if someone had written down observations during preparing and using it. The last object was a leather bound book filled with lines that did not resemble any writing Severus would recognize. It looked more like pages filled with aimless squiggles as from someone idly doodling in class. But the leather felt ancient and so he set it aside with great care.

Then he got parchment, ink and quill and started reading the translation.

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This was how the Dark Lord found his Potions Master not an hour later: reading the translation he had written down, and surrounded by books he was referring to now and then. Not wanting to rip him from his thoughts, Marvolo set the small pensieve and the box he had floating beside him gently down on the other end of the table. It did seem that his wayward follower was at least dedicated to his chosen art, if not to him.

A few moments later Severus looked up to search for another book. As his gaze landed on his Lord, he startled, and was about to jump up from his seat when said Dark Lord motioned for him to stay seated and conjured himself another stool to sit on.

As the snake like man sat on the stool of dark wood, the dark haired wizard lowered himself on his seat again, trying to hide his nervousness at sitting in his Lord’s presence. “I see you already have started, Severus.” The Potions Master nodded. “I am pleased that you are so eager to find a solution to this riddle.” A frail looking, pale hand gestured to the small stone bowl inscribed with runes and the box of red gleaming wood beside it. “I have brought you a pensieve and all of Wormtail’s memories from his brewing this potion. I tried to let him write down what he had done, but it was useless chicken-scratch. The vials are labelled and in chronological order. If you find something missing, I gladly will obtain it for you.” A cold shiver run down Severus’ back due to the cruel smile on the noseless face.

“That goes for everything you might need. Other ingredients, books or scripts, information, help. Whatever it is, name it and you will get it. I tire of looking like this,” he said with scorn and waving a hand in front of himself.

Severus tried to calm his rapidly beating heart. He still was afraid and undecided what to do once the ultimatum would run out at the end of August. It was hard not to let his fear be known. And to predict the actions of this saner version of the Dark Lord proved to be almost impossible. They
were sitting in an improvised potions laboratory – on simple stools! – and the most lethal dark wizard in many a decade had just told him to ask for whatever he deemed necessary, with the promise to get it for him.

“At the moment, my Lord,” Severus cleared his throat to get rid of the squeaky undertone, “I am mostly in need of information. Am I right to assume that these,” he pointed to the vials standing a little aside, “are the remnants of the potion used to get you back?” A short nod of the bald head was his only answer, so he continued, “The translation you provided, my Lord, is very detailed, and Pettigrew’s memories will be most useful. But I still am not sure what all the effects of his errors are.” He gulped and had difficulties even looking in the direction of Voldemort, afraid he would get cursed for even thinking about asking so intrusive questions.

“Other as your outer appearance, what other adverse effects did your resurrection have?” his heart started to beat faster again as the Dark Lord’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

But the eyes went back to normal as the Dark Lord spoke softly, “Adverse effects. Yes, there are a few. I take two pain relief potions most days, and dreamless sleep for two nights out of five. Muscles and bones ache most of the time, and I require more rest than I would like. There is not one hair left on my body, replaced with scales, it would seem.” He was thoughtful and stared directly at Snape, capturing his gaze. “I have not run a diagnostic on myself, so I am not able to tell what might be wrong with my internal organs.”

Severus at first was not sure, but as the man on the opposite side of the table just looked at him and raised a hairless brow, he guessed that he was to cast a diagnostic spell on him to get the information he required. So he stood and walked around the table, getting his wand from its holster. His knees tried to tremble as he got so near to the man he was spying on, but he refused to let this affect him.

As the Dark Lord left a few minutes later, Severus took deep, even breaths to calm down and started to organize all the information he had. Time to start with the task he was very much looking forward to: deciphering an ancient and obscure potion, and finding out what that idiot of a wizard had done wrong. Shoving back the worry and fear into the dark depths of his mind, he turned to the pensieve and got to work.

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Hoping that he could keep up with the happenings in the wizarding world, Harry had taken out a subscription to the Daily Prophet shortly before the last day of school. Now he was standing just inside his window, waiting for the owl to bring the newspaper in the early morning light. Little Whinging was still sleeping, and the gangly teen could hear the snoring of his quite massive uncle just a few doors from his room.

The ordinary brown delivery owl came to his window before the sun could shine over the roof of the house on the opposite side of the street. Harry paid the five Knuts for his newspaper and let himself fall on his bed to read it. After a few glances over the front page, Harry threw the paper frustrated against the wall. Another day without news about Voldemort. He did not bother to check the rest of the pages, because the only news he was interested in would surely make the front page.
The rest of the time before the Dursleys would start to rise, Harry lay on his messy bed staring at the paint flakes on the ceiling. He was without motivation to do anything. No book could hold his interest for long, he had not started on his homework, even though the Dursleys had let him keep his trunk and schoolbooks. And in this motivation-less state he switched between phases of unrest, pacing his room or roaming through the streets, and apathy just lying on his bed and staring at nothing.

Apart from his odd moods, this summer was nicer than all before. Dudley’s diet had come to an end, and there were normal meals again, even if Harry mostly had no appetite. Most of the time he was left alone, just a few chores now and then, usually weeding in the garden, cooking, and cleaning.

As he got up to prepare breakfast, the sounds from his family rising now being heard, Harry suddenly was struck with an idea. If the Daily Prophet did not bring any news, likely because Fudge was still trying to deny Voldemort’s return, then maybe there could be something interesting on the muggle news? When Sirius had broken out of Azkaban, there had been something about him on the news his relatives watched each evening. Something as big as attacks from Death Eaters on muggles… surely that would be reported? Probably as some freak accident, or a natural disaster, but he would know what it truly meant. Yes, that was the way to go. He would follow the news on television and try to get informations that way.

Unhelpful letters from Ron and Hermione, and useless newspaper be damned, he would not accept to be totally cut off from his own world.

oooOOooo

At the same time in London, a man with long white hair and beard walked his big black dog down a street with old houses. This neighbourhood had once been much better than now, old townhouses with ornaments lined a little square with something resembling a miniature garden in the middle. But now the houses were dirty and in dire need of new paint. Some windows were broken and the small front gardens were overgrown with weeds.

Both dog and man strode purposefully to the place where the houses eleven and thirteen met. The residents of Grimmauld Place had long ago stopped trying to comprehend why the numbering of the houses was off, it was the way it was and only confused a new postman or postwoman now and again.

Had one of the occupants of the surrounding houses looked out of the window this early in the morning, they might have noticed the old man and his dog vanishing just as they reached the houses. But as it was much too early on a weekend, no one witnessed this vanishing act.

A door, not opened in many years, now creaked on its hinges and two men stepped over the threshold into a grimy, dusty, and dark hall.

“Could be the old elf died a few years ago. It certainly looks and smells like it.” The dark haired and gaunt wizard in old patched clothes that were too wide for him, said while looking around in disgust. “I did not think I would ever set foot in this house again.”

As they moved deeper into the hall, they came across an umbrella stand that looked very much like it was made out of a troll’s leg, and some ornaments on the walls that looked as if they had
belonged to some animal or other living thing before they had got here.

“Well, Sirius my boy, given the rather paranoid nature of your late parents, this place is practically pre..” The white haired man in bright turquoise clothing was cut short by some shrill screeching from further down the hall.

“How dare you come back here, you unworthy traitor of a son!”

Sirius was frantically looking around, thinking his mother had died years ago and confused as to how he could hear her usual charming self making herself known. He did not need to search long, as the constant stream of insults in his mother’s voice led him directly to an ugly painting of her, hung on the wall nearest to the staircase to the upper floors, framed by some moth-eaten curtains.

He did not try to reason with her – it had never worked when she was alive, and he had no reason to believe that death would have changed her – and simply cast a stunning spell at her. Immediately it was quiet again.

“Why don’t we go to the kitchen.” Dumbledore suggested, and nodding, Sirius led the way. Once out of the hall and into an equally dingy and dirty kitchen the Headmaster of Hogwarts spoke again.

“The house needs a thorough cleaning.” He looked after a rat that scurried away and vanished behind one of the cupboards, “but it is big enough to house a few of the Order members, even all of them if need be. And with the security already in place, we will find nowhere else as suited to our needs, I am afraid.”

Sirius rolled his eyes at seeing the Headmaster’s eyes twinkle merrily “Yeah, and once we have cast the Fidelius with you as Secret Keeper, it will be even more secure. But I really do not look forward to being locked in here without hope of helping in any substantial way.” He briefly considered if it was worth a try and brought up a topic Albus had deflected more than once in the past.

“Why don’t you try to get me a trial? You know there wasn’t one the first time I was captured and thrown into Azkaban. You know that a questioning under Veritaserum would prove my innocence. I could help more, and be there for Harry.” Seeing that Albus was about to interrupt him, he rushed the last sentence out, “And you are Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot!”

If possible, the twinkle in the Headmaster’s eyes intensified and he smiled benevolently at the little rant “I fear, my boy,” he sighed and morphed his face into a sad expression, “That I will not be for much longer. Fudge will not believe me, and paints me as a barmy old idiot. The only reason I’m still in this position is, or so I guess, that they cannot agree on a new Chief Warlock.”

Sirius growled in frustration. He was not blind, and saw quite clearly that Albus had no intention to even try to clear his name. But he was not sure why it was so important for the old leader of the Order of the Phoenix to keep him a fugitive. Still, there was no reason to rush or confront him just now.

“We should have tried earlier to clear me. It would be most convenient now if I could move more freely, and be your eyes and ears in the Wizengamot if you are indeed removed from your position.”

And with that the topic was closed once more, and they moved on to check the house for the most dangerous things to clean out, before they let the others come here to start the more basic cleanup.
Severus was settling into a routine quite fast. At first he was worried that Theodore may be in trouble with the Dark Lord staying in his home over the summer. But the contact between the boy and the Dark Lord was minimal. All residents of the house were eating meals together. After Severus missed two meals on the first day here, an elf started to appear a half-hour before meals were to be served to remind him to take a break in his work and go to the dining room. So the four of them meet three times a day, talking about Theodore's summer assignments and the happenings at Hogwarts this last school year, Quidditch of all things, gossip from the Ministry, happenings on the Continent, magical theory in general... only topics that were appropriate for conversation at the table when a fifteen year old boy was present.

What baffled him even more was the order by Voldemort not to call him “Lord” while seated at the table for meals. Nott Senior was calling him “Marvolo” every time they interacted when only they were there, a name the Dark Lord suggested Severus too should be using, but all that Severus could himself get to do was call him “Sir”. With each passing day he felt more confused, something he did not like to be, as making one false move could be his death.

At the moment, however, he was in his improvised lab, chopping leaves of murtlap for the potion he was brewing. After he had found out that Pettigrew was still absolutely useless at potions, he knew where to start.

The rat had used the same stirrer for preparing the potion used to keep the temporary body of their Lord alive and for the potion that would be used in his resurrection. Without cleaning it in between of course. And he had done so repeatedly. In this way he had contaminated the resurrection potion with snake venom. His carelessness also allowed snake scales and dust from the house to get into the potion.

After his Lord got him some scales and venom from his familiar and dust from wherever they had been staying at that time, it had been rather easy to determine exactly what had gone wrong and how the resurrection potion had been altered. Discussing his findings with the Dark Lord had resulted in a lively afternoon. He had almost been able to forget with whom he had been speaking at the time as they had come up with a course of action.

Now Severus had almost finished the cure. A poison targeting serpents, that would remove anything of Nagini's from his Lord’s body, mixed with potent healing ingredients that would restore what was harmed, removed or injured in the process.

He stirred counter clockwise, counting under his breath while the potion in the iron cauldron changed its colour in stages from a vibrant green to a blue so dark it could have been mistaken for black. Lifting the stirrer out and cleaning it with a soft cloth – he would never leave equipment dirty like idiots tended to do – he extinguished the flames under the cauldron and moved it to the side to let it cool. Cleaning his hands with fresh water and casting a shield over the cauldron the Potions Master got ready to inform his Lord that the potion was finished.
Lucius was feeling odd. Here he was, sitting on a love seat, nibbling on a cucumber sandwich and drinking tea, while in the chair across from him sat the Dark Lord, doing the same. He still looked not human, with ruby-red eyes, missing his nose, and the almost white and lightly iridescent skin, he resembled a snake more than anything else. But he did act so … normal. Asking about his family and offering refreshments. His Lord being charming while looking this decidedly not human was unnerving.

His thoughts wandered to his friend, who was somewhere in the house brewing and researching and kept like a prisoner. He worried a little that he might be in danger because their Lord did not believe that he still was loyal. Severus’ act as a traitor spying for Dumbledore had been rather convincing, and a better tactic than claiming to have been under the Imperius curse.

After the more mundane report of what was going on in the Ministry, he now got to the point that had him both excited and a little wary. “And finally, we have made progress in the search for information on the prerequisites for claiming the Slytherin Lordship.”

That got his Lord’s attention immediately, he sat his cup down and fixed ruby eyes on the blond aristocrat. “It seems that to become Lord Slytherin, the of-age wizard that wants to claim the title needs to be a parselmouth and to have an heir, a boy, that is also able to speak with snakes.”

Something resembling hope flickered briefly in the Dark Lord’s eyes before he leant back in his chair and a thoughtful expression replaced too brief flicker.

“So only a man with a son, both parselmouths, can claim the title?”

Lucius nodded, “Yes, my Lord.”

“Well that is rather unfortunate.” Lucius tensed “I do not have a wife, or someone that would be a possibility to become so at this point. And I would rather not wait that long.” he trailed off, clearly thinking about ways to get what he wanted as soon as possible.

On the love seat Lucius tried to stay calm, he felt odd because before his downfall that night, a curse would surely have been cast on him by now. It was a little unsettling that his Lord's behaviour was so different than what he had came to expect.

“A few decades back, there was a scandal about a bastard-born wizard that claimed to be part of a noble family. Of course all members of this family protested the claim. If I remember correctly a Wizengamot hearing was called and the claim confirmed, he had the traits of the family that were found in no other. Look it ..” A knock on the door interrupted Voldemort mid sentence “Come in!”

The door swung inward and Severus stepped through, bowing low. “My Lord, the potion is finished and cooling as we speak.”

Lucius was relieved to see his friend in what seemed to be a healthy state, but did not show it, carefully maintaining a blank mask.

“Very well, Severus.” The Potions Master straightened again and stood waiting just inside the door. “Lucius, search for precedents on this matter and report back in two days.”

Dismissed, Lucius rose from his seat, bowed, and stalked out of the door, swinging his cane and closing the door behind himself.

“Come here, Severus,” Marvolo pointed to the floor in front of him and watched as Severus came over without so much as a flicker of hesitation. He got out his wand and saw a brief widening of the Potion Master’s eyes before he cast a levitation charm at one chair, directing it to place itself
behind the other man.

“Sit down and give me your arm.”

A little wary looking, Severus sat down and started to roll up the sleeve of his robes, opening the buttons on the cuff of the shirt he wore underneath and rolling it up also, exposing the Dark Mark.

“I have thought a while now about the obvious nature of my Mark and have been researching to create a few adjustments to it.” He grabbed the pale arm of the man before him. “I have not tried this yet on any of you, so brace yourself.”

He lowered the tip of his wand to the Mark and began hissing the incantations he had worked out over the last week to change the Marks on his followers' arms. He felt Severus stiffen and saw his jaw clenching, trying not to show the pain the changes brought. In the middle of his incantation the Mark began to fade and shrink, changing colour and sliding, directed with the wand tip, down to the side of Severus' wrist.

By the time he was finished, tears were running down the Potion Master’s face, and he was breathing in shallow, fast breaths. “Relax a moment,” Marvolo said, gently laying the arm down, stepping back and taking one of the pain potions out of the desk drawer.

“Take this” he said kindly, holding the vial for Snape to take, who did so with a shaking hand.

“You can still use the Mark as you did before to call me, it will show itself clear enough if you wish to see it. Furthermore, I changed it to announce a call differently.” That got a surprised look from the still shaken man. The Dark Lord smiled a little evilly.

“I would not want to kill you by accident when you jump from pain while brewing, would I? Now it will get hot gradually, giving you enough warning not to blow yourself up.”

After the potion started to work, dampening the pain, Severus got up once more, and they both made their way to the potions lab to collect a dose of the potion to restore the snakelike man to his own body again.

Some minutes later, Severus set foot into his Lord’s own bedroom for the first time. He was carrying a case with emergency potions: blood replenishers, pain potions, some Skele-Gro, and different potions designed to heal damage to muscles and skin. His Lord carrying the dose of the potion that Severus had been brewing the last few days.

His gaze swept around seeing a big bed with a green silken comforter, many big pillows, and dark green bed curtains, some shelves filled with a multitude of books, a chair with a robe draped over it, and a small desk buried under parchments. What threw him, though, was a little ritual circle with a chair in its centre that was laid out in one corner of the room, with a clear view of the bed.

“Make yourself comfortable over there, Severus.” His Lord gestured to the chair, so Severus set the case down beside the bed before moving into the circle. He did not feel comfortable doing so, but there was no way to avoid it.

The circle was drawn with different materials directly onto the wooden floor. Complicated runes in red, black, and gold entwined around four candles, one white, one blue, one green, and the last red.

Working to stay outwardly calm he asked, “What is this circle for, my Lord?”

“It will make sure you cannot move around this room with the intent to harm me.” The Dark Lord smirked in his Potion Master’s direction. “I may trust that your pride and curiosity will not let you
tamper with a potion you developed yourself, because I know you will want to know if you could actually give me a body back. But that does not prevent me from taking precautions to make sure you cannot harm me while I recover.”

A little taken aback, Severus settled in the chair and watched as the candles were lighted all at once without a word. Seconds later, hissing words falling from pale, almost non existent lips, made a shimmering dome appear, enclosing Severus and the chair, but not the circle itself.

“You can come out if there is some mishap and you want to aid me. That is the reason I want you here. But you will feel compelled to return should you change your mind once outside of the circle. Understood?” Severus nodded mutely, even if he normally disliked such behaviour, he could not find words in this moment. It seemed that Voldemort truly did not trust him any more, a notion that confused Severus a great deal. Or maybe now he was sane once more, he just could think more clearly and saw the possible dangers in this situation?

While he was pondering on the implications of the situation, the Dark Lord had set the vial down on the bedside table and started to strip out of his clothes. Then he slipped on a simple nightshirt and sat on the bed, casting some wards around it so he would not fall should he move around much. Setting down his wand and taking the potion vial, he settled down in the middle of the bed, breaking the seal and casting one last look at the man encased in a shimmering dome.

“Now we will see if the cure will work as we planned.”

Severus now was totally focused on the man on the bed, who, right after drinking down the potion in one big gulp, sank down on the pillows and started to writhe and moan.

That was going to be a hell of a night.

In the smallest bedroom in an ordinary house in Surrey, a boy with messy black hair started to moan and toss in his sleep.

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
The next morning dawned bright and early, and the rising sun woke Harry. He was sore and stiff all over, wondering what he had done the day before that made him so. Maybe sitting slumped on a swing all day was the cause? He stretched and bent, trying to make the knots in his muscles disappear, before making a fast and silent visit to the bathroom.

Back in his room he contemplated his odd dreams of the night before, therefore not seeing the small feather ball darting around his room at first. Only after he spotted Hedwig following the chirping little owl with her eyes, did he realize that Ron had written him another letter.

Guessing that this one was probably as uninformative and frustrating as all the others he had gotten so far, Harry was not overly cautious in grabbing Pig from the air and getting his letter from the tiny owl. Pig did not seem to mind and kept annoying the snowy owl by the window after Harry did release him, sinking to the floor by the window opening the letter.

_Dear Harry,_

_Holidays are busy. We moved to a place I cannot talk about and have not a minute to do what we want. I hope that you can come soon to stay the rest of summer with us._

_The twins are quite busy, always hiding something from mom. Want to take a bet when she will catch up with them? I hope that I’ll be able to watch!_

_Your relatives are not acting too bad, are they? Anyway, don’t let them get to you, and don’t leave the house. Sorry, but mom always reminds me to write that._

_Hope to see you soon_

_Ron_

Another useless letter from Ron. Hermione’s at least were longer, writing about their holiday assignments, books she had read and what she and her parents were doing. And it was better to get any letters than getting none, like in his first summer back from Hogwarts. He hated being kept in
the dark about what was going on, though. Not the best way to make him stay out of trouble, he was restless and starting to lose his temper with his relatives. That they would not let him listen to the news only added to his foul mood.

Sighing, he put Ron’s letter with the others, and headed down to the kitchen to start preparing breakfast.

Severus was rubbing his temples and resting in his chair inside the circle. It had been a hell of a night. More than once he had left the circle to give his Lord one of the potions prepared for the possibility that they would be needed. Almost all of them were gone now. He felt quite a bit of pride as he sat there, looking at the result of his research and brewing.

On the bed, under the comforter, lay the Dark Lord sleeping peacefully after a long, agonizing night. He had hair again, falling in soft waves to his shoulders and framing a pale but no longer white face with its nice rich brown colour. The face showed aristocratic lines, now that there was a nose again and the brows were once more in existence. He looked more healthy all over, with a pale but no longer white complexion and a little more muscles on the still thin frame.

Severus was not quite sure why he had left the circle to help as it had become obvious that the healing part of the potion was not potent enough to counteract the poison that was destroying every part that was more snake than human. No one else would have come in time to help, and the Dark Lord would have been stopped once again. Was it that he thought it quite possible that the circle would hold him captive even if the one that had set it up had died? Or was it that he wished to be trusted once more, now that his Lord was thinking with a clear head? The Potions Master was full of conflicting wishes. There were so many potions banned as dark just because they used human blood, many of which were useful healing potions, that had no “light” counterparts. There was so much magic that could help them stay safe from muggles, forbidden because the process of casting them required rituals that were similar to some dark ones. He did agree that those bans needed to be lifted. But the methods used to achieve this in the last war, those he could not accept. Muggle-born wizards and witches surely were a problem, eroding the culture of the wizarding world, but killing them all would just lead to more inbreeding, something that would lead to more squibs. At least that was his theory.

But now, now everything was changing in front of his very own eyes. If not for his vow to protect Harry Potter, he really might be tempted to join the Dark Lord fully once more. But who was he trying to fool? The vow was there, and two weeks of different behaviour on his Lord’s part were no guarantee that his methods really would change enough for him to be able to support his Lord’s plans without hesitation again.

“Severus?” a slightly hoarse voice ask from the bed.

Severus stood “Yes, my Lord?”

Voldemort rose slowly up and positioned himself against the headboard. Looking at his hands he spoke. “It seems that the potion did work. Did I dream that you came to my aid sometime in the night?”

“You did not dream, my Lord. It became necessary to administer some blood replenisher and
additional healing potions during the night.”

The man on the bed nodded, carding his hands through his full, wavy hair. “I think showers for the both of us are in order.” He waved a hand in the direction of Severus, extinguishing the flames of the candles that had burned down almost by half, dispelling the shimmering dome.

“See you at breakfast, Severus.”

Understanding he was dismissed, Severus bowed and left for his own rooms, to shower and change into some fresh robes.

Lord Lucius Malfoy strode purposefully through the entrance hall of the Ministry of Magic on his way to the chambers of the Wizengamot. Today was their monthly meeting, and he was looking forward to the things they would accomplish today.

He greeted a few familiar faces as he walked alongside the Fountain of Magical Brethren, taking the shortest route to the elevators over the polished dark wood floor. His heavy silk robes, a dark shade of blue complimenting his eyes and bearing the embroidered crest of his family, swinging around his legs and making his entrance more impressive.

The others were arriving as well, easily spotted between the Ministry employees with their grand robes of expensive materials, all with their house crests on the right side of their breasts.

Waiting for an elevator to arrive, another stepped to his side and greeted cheerily, “Good morning, Lucius! How are you doing on this fine day?”

Turning to the man at his side Lucius let his eyes roam over him, taking in the details. Benjamin Nott was in his best Wizengamot robes, dark red silk with brown trim and the crest showing a merman done in silver, smiling widely obviously in very good spirits.

“I am quite well, Benjamin. You seem to be in a good mood today?”

Benjamin nodded happily and led the way into the arriving elevator. “I trust your house guests are fine?”

“Yes, they are,” the dark-haired wizard nodded. “They completed a potions experiment last night and did not get much sleep. So they went to rest some more right after breakfast.” He smiled again, and Lucius wondered how life must be at Nott House with their Lord staying there. It seemed to be much more bearable than he would have thought. Once more he chastised himself for his ill choice of cover story that now made it impossible for him to be host to his Lord.

They change topic after that, talking about the garden party Narcissa was planning for later in July. Together they walked into the oval-shaped chamber of the Wizengamot. The room was arranged in terraces. On ground level there were the seats of the most Ancient and Noble Houses. Some of them, like the Slytherin seat, empty for hundreds of years. On the next terrace there were the seats of the Noble Houses, after that followed the seats of the Houses. The seats were benches made of a variety of materials, from alabaster and other stones to different coloured woods and metals, all carved with the plants and animals belonging to the crests of the house in question. An empty seat always meant that there was still family left that could claim the seat. Most of the time those that
could claim the title were not aware of the fact, so seats on this level often stayed empty once an heir did not claim.

Among the empty seats there were those of Slytherin, Gryffindor and Hufflepuff as well as Black. Lucius knew that the seat of Slytherin would not stay empty much longer and he hoped that Draco or one of his sons would claim the Black seat in a few years.

The seat of the Potter family was on the level of the Noble Houses, just as his own was. In front of the bench stood a small and insignificant stool, used by the regent who was casting votes for House Potter until the current heir could claim the Lordship. As this position was filled by Dumbledore, who also was Chief Warlock, the stool was always empty as well.

Lucius reached his bench, greeting some of the others as he went past them, and sat down on the marble seat held up by peacocks, which were as white as the albino ones at home. He saw that Augusta Longbottom had brought her grandson, who was sitting beside her on the cherry wood bench carved with vines and blossoms. It was quite common for the heir or heiress to accompany the current lord or lady to learn how things were done. For this purpose the benches were big enough for two to sit on.

The last members of the Wizengamot drifted into the chamber and started to find their seats. Clerks settled themselves at the long narrow table down the middle of the oval, Dumbledore as current Chief Warlock sitting down right between the Minister and Madame Bones on the slightly raised dais just inside the doors.

The meeting was called to order with a few bangs sent from the assistant's wand. Dumbledore started to call out the order of business and came to the point calling for anyone to add to the agenda. Most were silent, but Fudge rose to his feet “I have a point to bring forward!”

“The floor goes to the Minister!” Dumbledore acknowledged, looking only mildly interested, but Lucius noted that the infernal twinkling in his eyes was missing.

“I call for a vote of no-confidence on the current Chief Warlock, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, on the grounds that he is telling stories about a certain Dark Lord being back without providing proof and therefore spreading panic throughout our community.”

Now Dumbledore could no longer hold the grave face under his mask and asked almost without emotion, “A vote for no-confidence needs at least three supporters to go through. Who supports the Minister’s call for a vote?”

Funny enough, Lucius did not need to stand himself, as several others, from light families no less, stood and declared to support the call for a vote.

All went rather quickly after that. The vote was called, and the members of the Wizengamot removed the old Headmaster from his position as Chief Warlock. Only a few voted for him to stay, among them Lady Longbottom and Lord Vance.

The next part was what had caused the most work beforehand, the election of the new Chief Warlock. It had taken quite some time to find someone who had enough supporters throughout the chamber to win the vote.

In the last days Lucius had had so many meetings over meals, most days more than one tea, each with different people, to further this: getting rid of Dumbledore in at least one crucial place. In the end they could agree on Lord Abbott, who was known to be a stickler for the rules. Originally Lucius had not been happy with the choice, bribery would be impossible and much more
dangerous with him in charge. But now as their plans were relying so heavily on old laws being interpreted exactly as they had been intended in the first place, with Abbot as Chief Warlock their chances improved considerably.

Lucius watched as the meeting came to an end, people standing up and forming circles speaking with each other, discussing the new development and the meeting to be held in two weeks' time, as the rest of the agenda had been moved. The new Chief Warlock needed time to get everything in order.

“Look at the old fool.” smirked Benjamin, coming over from his seat. “If he continues the way he has, in a short while he will be a permanent guest of Janus Thickey.” They both smirked at that and turned to leave.

As he had expected Lucius was home for lunch. His lovely wife, clad in a dark blue sun dress and pastel blue robes, greeted him in the floo room with an embrace and a kiss.

“You are back early,” she said stepping back again, “I guess all went well?”

“Yes, all went well. Benjamin told me that last night the potion was ready and did what it was designed for.”

Hope blossomed on the blonde lady’s face, and they both started to walk in the direction of the family dining room they used when Draco was home from school.

“Is our Lord …” Narcissa was clearly searching for the right word, wanting to express her worry for her Lord’s well-being and simultaneously not wanting to indicate that he was in any shape or form weak.

“I do not know for sure, darling. But I expect to visit Benjamin at home in the near future.” On this happy note they reached their destination and were joined by Draco, who came down from his rooms.

“Father, I did not expect to see you for lunch. Did something go wrong?” He was eager to hear about Wizengamot meetings, and always hoped his father would take him along. Now that he was fifteen, it was time for him to see more of what he had learned the theory of, in action.

“Do not fret Draco, all went rather well. We cut the meeting short because the new Chief Warlock needs time to sort everything out and assume his duties.”

They went in and headed for their usual places around the table. The room was not overly large, much cosier than the dinning room they used while entertaining guests. The table offered space for up to six people, but was laid for the three of them. The wood was a light birch, and the walls were painted in light earth tones, accented nicely with drappings in various shades of green.

“As the plans of our Lord are going so well, I think I can anticipate what will be the next step.” Lucius struck a small gong with a wave of his wand, and the elves served lunch. There was a light soup and some fresh baked bread, to be followed by some ice cream with fruit salad.

“And what do you anticipate to be the next step in the plan?” Narcissa inquired, appearing politely
disinterested.

“We will have to find a boy that is a Parselmouth. In fact, I am not sure how to go about it. I guess there maybe is a young wizard from a light family hiding the gift. If there was one somewhere in our circle of acquaintances, we would surely know by now. Don’t you think?”

Narcissa nodded thoughtfully “Yes, if Theodore, Blaise, Gregory, or Vincent were so gifted, we would know. The same goes for those that are younger or older. Is there some spell to check? Maybe one designed to check newborns?”

Draco followed his parents' exchange, a little dumbstruck. How could they have forgotten? He tried to catch their attention, and finally resorted to clearing his throat, earning himself a glare from his father.

“Stop this uncouth behaviour at once.”

Ignoring the reprimand Draco seized the opportunity, “We already know a boy who is a parselmouth.”

That got him the attention he had tried to get. “Who is it?” the patriarch asked with an intense gaze on his son.

“Harry Potter.”

Both elder Malfoys now were clearly shocked.

“Don’t you remember? In my second year? The one and only, disastrous meeting of the duelling club? I cast a Serpensortia and Potter spoke to the snake. The whole school spoke about nothing else for weeks. I am quite sure that I wrote more than one annoyed letter about all the attention Potter was getting.”

Lucius' eyes began to gleam. “Well done, Draco, well done,” he praised his son, giving him a pat on the back, before returning to the meal. “I will remember to tell our Lord where I got this information.”

Smiling proudly Draco stayed quiet for the rest of the meal, listening to his father recounting the events of today's Wizengamot meeting.

oooOOooo

Lord Voldemort stood on a small improvised dais in the biggest parlour of Nott House. There would be barely enough room for all of his Death Eaters, even though they had removed all the furniture beforehand.

He was feeling a little nostalgic. Severus and Benjamin already stood, clothed in dark robes and white masks, in the room waiting for the others to arrive. He had called them all, the first time after his resurrection that they all were going to be in one place.

Sure, the young Lestrange brothers would be unable to come, as would Bellatrix; Karkaroff surely would not dare to show up. He needed to think of something he could do about the traitor, without jeopardizing his new plans. It just would not do to leave him unpunished. Maybe he could ruin him
publicly and let it look like suicide.

Thinking about traitors, his gaze wandered to Severus. He was clearly conflicted, not a lost cause yet, and if he could win him back he would have once more a spy in the enemy's camp. Maybe he could find more opportunities to show his Potions Master what had changed now that he had most of his soul back.

After a few minutes the others started to arrive. All behind their masks and coming forward to bow to him, he could see their eyes and judge their reactions to his new looks.

He almost looked like his younger self again. He had cut his hair a little so it did not quite reach his shoulders. No longer painfully thin and constantly freezing, he had opted for some lighter robes that flowed with every step he took. He looked a little over thirty, for being way beyond sixty, that was not half bad. The only notable difference that could not be attributed to ageing was the colour of his eyes. They had stayed a rich burgundy and ruby red. In fact, he had spent quite some time sitting in front of a mirror, trying and failing to count and name all the shades of red present in his irises. He liked them the way they were, and he had not yet decided if he would glamour them or not, once he was out in public again.

As all those he expected to show up had arrived, he started to speak.

“As you all have seen, the first step in my plans was successfully completed. And the next steps are being prepared. Today Albus Dumbledore lost his position as Chief Warlock.”

This announcement was met with a cheer.

“And tomorrow will carry us all a step further towards our goals.” He scanned the crowd for the one he needed now. “And we begin by punishing incompetence. Incarcerous!”

Thin, flexible ropes wound around Pettigrew, binding him. With a squeak he lost his balance and fell, face first, on the ground. Two additional fast spells later, and he was unable to transform and flee as a rat and was silenced as well. Continuous squeaks and pleading would only distract them.

“Wormtail, you almost killed me again with your incompetent brewing. Your punishment will aid us on our way to a better world for Magic. Maybe you can right some errors that you have made.” A cruel smile flittered over his face, Nagini slithering over to the rat and circling him where he lay on the floor, all but ignored by those that stood surrounding him.

.:May I eat him, master?:. Nagini hissed tasting the air above the bound man.

.:You may not, my lovely. Sadly, he is needed still:. he smiled fondly at his familiar .:We will find you something that is better tasting:. he hissed in reply and left her to play.

Voldemort waved to one of the men standing a little to the back of the crowd, and sat down on his throne like chair. Now to the boring and most necessary part of the meeting: the reports.

First there were reports given on the state of the economy, the population and its development, individual witches and wizards that had been approached to see if they would be willing to contribute, happenings in different departments in the Ministry and some more little matters. Finally Lucius stepped forward, once again retelling the happenings from the meeting of the Wizengamot in the morning, the reactions of the Lords and Ladies to the events being the most important part.

After that he started to give out more tasks, mostly research, some law-designing and information-
gathering. Some of the rougher Death Eaters he send to find Karkaroff and investigate him, with focus on information that could be the traitor's public downfall.

“Benjamin.” The called man stepped forward and bowed. “I trust all is ready for the meeting tomorrow?”

The stocky man bowed again. “Yes, my Lord, my request was granted earlier today.” At a nod from his Lord he stepped back again.

And now for the last part, the part that was crucial to his plans, and solely dependent on sheer luck. There was always still the other option, that would take so much longer. So try this one first.

“I want you all to look out and discreetly search for an underage wizard who is able to speak with snakes. If he was born on British soil that would be ideal, but I guess I cannot be picky, seeing that my gift is not a common one.”

That was the moment Lucius had been waiting for. He stepped forward out of the crowd directly before the raised dais, bowing once more. “My Lord, I believe that there is no need for a search. My son Draco reminded me at lunch today that there is currently a known Parselmouth attending Hogwarts.” If possible the room was now even more silent than mere moments before, the people present not daring to breathe.

“There is?” A dark brow rose towards the new wavy brown hairline.

“Yes, my Lord. Over two years ago, there was an attempt to create a duelling club at Hogwarts, during which Harry Potter ordered a snake not to attack a student. He spoke in Parseltongue in front of most of the school.”

An evil smirk developed on the Dark Lord’s face, sending cold shivers over his followers' backs. Fate did have humour, she really did.

oooOOooo

Marvolo was on his way down to breakfast, wearing robes borrowed from Benjamin. After all, he wanted to portray the confused, recently resurrected wizard staying with the son of an old school friend.

He had some spring in his step, all his plans were going reasonably well. At the meeting yesterday evening, he had changed the Mark on all of his followers as he had for Severus. He had been overly arrogant to mark those that were his so obviously. The solution now was much better.

The other task he had completed the previous evening was to alter Wormtail’s memories. The rat now remembered that he had made all the decisions himself, how to get the blood for the ritual, where to stay and to kill Bartemius Crouch senior and the muggle. Another small piece of the story he was about to tell.

He felt surprisingly energized after an evening of so much strenuous magic. Had he tried this much new marking on one evening, before he had lost his old body, he might have had a headache by now. Losing most of one's soul seemed to affect the magical endurance. Who would have thought?
They all met at the table, and, as usual this early in the morning, not much was said. The Daily Prophet was split between them, Theodore got the sports pages first – those with scores from Quidditch matches, broom-race results, and reports from duelling competitions – his father the gossip section, the Dark Lord the main articles, and Severus the small ad-pages, looking for people offering brewing equipment and journals. While reading they were each drinking their first coffee of the day. After swapping the respective newspaper parts, conversation usually would start.

As it did on this day. “Now that you have successfully found a cure, Severus, I do not require you to stay here all the time,” remarked the Dark Lord, taking another roll and an apple, “I am certain that you normally would use this time away from the school to get some private research and brewing done.”

The Potions Master nodded in the affirmative. “The last week was a most rewarding experience. None of my planned projects would have been even half this interesting and challenging.” He took another sip from the hot, strong coffee he had dosed liberally with honey “If there are more potions you want to have brewed, my Lord, I am more than happy to stay.”

It had taken some time, but now Severus was quite comfortable eating and drinking at meals and holding a conversation with his Lord. In a way, the meals reminded him of those held at Hogwarts where he was forced to socialize with the other professors.

“At the moment I am not in need of your talents, Severus. So please use your time as you see fit. I will call you when I need you.”

With a slightly evil and expectant smile he added “And if you have anything noteworthy to report, do not hesitate to come here and do so at any time you can get away from the Headmaster.”

This had Severus worried all over again. Yesterday the task to search for a Parselmouth, only for Potter to be mentioned, and now this only thinly veiled hint that there would be events the Order would likely speak about and react to. Outwardly calm, he started to think back over everything he had seen and heard in the last week, to find a clue to what might happen that had his Lord in so high spirits.

After breakfast Benjamin and Marvolo moved to the patriarch’s study on the first floor. Marvolo took a small disk out of his robe pocket and handed it to the younger man.

“This is one of a pair. When I can come over, just twist the rings against each other, and my disk will heat up, alerting me.” Indicating that he understood, Benjamin took the small golden disk, tucking it in is inner pocket.

“Any more questions?”

“No, my Lord.” Lord Nott once more checked his appearance in the mirror, before stepping up to the floo, taking a pinch of floo powder from the container on the mantle, tossing it into the flames and stating clearly and firmly “Ministry of Magic, Minister’s office,” before vanishing in green
“Benjamin! Welcome! Welcome!” Lord Nott was greeted by the Minister of Magic and ushered over to the desk and one of the visitor chairs. “Can I offer you some tea? I take it you have eaten already?”

He answered in the affirmative and took the offer, settling down comfortably in the extravagant chair. If possible, the office seemed even more luxurious than the last time he had set foot in here. The floor was covered in thick carpets, the cushions silk, the furniture from rare woods, heavily carved in excess and accented with gold and gems. In the opinion of the Minister's visitor, the office was the definition of the saying 'too much of a good thing'.

“How can I help you, my friend? I am curious: what is so urgent that you request a meeting on such short notice, and with the request to keep it private.” There was a glint in the shorter man’s eyes, a glint not many saw and consequently underestimated the Minister and what he was prepared to do to reach his goals.

“A friend is currently staying with me. He is in a difficult position you might be able to help with.” That got Cornelius’ attention, he always took opportunities to gather favours. “My friend returned recently from a long stay abroad and finds his family estates in disorder.” Benjamin sipped from his tea, remembering his Lord's lecture to make the right impression and trying not to sound desperate, or hurried.

“I would be glad to be of help. Do I know your friend? What family are we speaking of? And what precisely is the problem with the estates?”

“You have certainly heard of him. And, well, while absent, he was declared dead. And now that he is back, he is unsure how to proceed.”

Fudge got thoughtful, his guest was speaking of a wizard, who had been absent for some time and had been believed dead. No one came to mind, but the problem was easy to solve nonetheless. “If he can bring proof of his identity, your friend can be declared alive again.” He smiled graciously. “I can help smooth the process, a friend of yours is also a friend of mine.”

Benjamin was amused that Cornelius was not picking up on the identity of his friend. “There is another problem. My friend has only hazy memories of his past, and the days before he … vanished.” He let a small smile grace his lips, retrieving a scroll of parchment from his robes. “He asked me to request a hearing before the Wizengamot based on this old law, which applies to his situation.”

Curious, the Minister took the scroll, removed the green silk ribbon holding it closed, and started reading.

His brow furrowed in confusion. Bodiless spirit? Restored to a human body? Faint alarm bells started ringing in Fudge's head, but he ignored them, as he often did. “May I meet your friend? His circumstances seem to be unique, and I would like to speak to him personally. It will make it a lot easier to help him get everything in order.”

Smiling and full of anticipation, Benjamin nodded and took the disk out of his pocket, twisting the
“He will be here in a moment. I am glad that I can rely on you, Cornelius, I really want to help my friend get back on his feet. He had quite some problems even before he vanished from Britain.”

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
Marvolo was pacing in Benjamin’s study from the fireplace along the desk and chairs to the bookcase and back. He concentrated on bringing forward the mask that he would be wearing for his meeting with the Minister.

A young, slightly nervous but confident wizard, who had a bad past but wanted to start anew.

The disk grew warm in his pocket, and Marvolo drew a deep breath, went to the fireplace, grabbed some of the content from the little tin of floo powder, and made the trip to the Minister’s office.

On the other end, he stepped out of the floo and took a good look around. Benjamin sat in one of the visitor chairs, a hidden smile in his eyes, wearing a set of his bests robes in preparation for the plans for later in the day.

Standing beside him, watching expectantly in the direction of the grand marble fireplace, was the Minister in pinstripe robes and a purple tie.

Benjamin stood to make the introductions. “Cornelius, may I introduce you to my friend Tom Marvolo Riddle. Tom, this is the Minister of Magic Cornelius Oswald Fudge.”

Marvolo bowed slightly and accepted the outstretched hand.

“Nice to meet you, Minister Fudge. I am grateful that you agreed to meet with me.”

Fudge waved his thanks away. “As I told Benjamin, his friends are mine as well. And the story he hinted at has me curious.” He gestured to the other visitor's chair and went around his desk to sit down himself.

“Maybe you can tell me how it is this law,“ he held up the scroll with the copy of the ancient law all their plans revolved around,” applies to you.”

Nodding, Marvolo settled down in the chair and felt a surge of excitement course through him. How long it had been since he felt this good?

He smiled a little uncertainly – all for show – and started his tale.

“It is a rather long story. If you do not mind, I will start at the beginning.”

That suited the Minister well, after all he was really curious what the story behind all this was. He ordered more tea and relaxed, preparing to hear an interesting story.

“I went to school with Benjamin’s father, Thoros Nott.” He allowed a smile and a blush in response to the surprise and disbelief on Fudge’s face. “After graduation I went on travels of the world, searching for ancient places of magic, forgotten knowledge, secrets, and wisdom.” a look of reminiscence entered his eyes, and the other wizards could hear in his voice how much he had enjoyed travelling.

“One day, after weeks of research and days of aimless wandering, I stumbled upon an ancient tomb somewhere in the forests of south America. It was a magnificent sight, and filled with powerful
"artefacts." Marvolo let sadness enter his voice and face, even as joy and glee were what he felt. It was working, Fudge was buying his story and still did not comprehend exactly who was sitting in his rather comfy chair.

He gave a sigh for effect and continued “After this day I was not the same any more. Paranoia dictated my every action. I returned to my home country and started to spread violence and collect supporters, some by force. This continued until one Samhain night nearly fourteen years ago.”

Fudge’s eyes got incredibly wide as he finally caught up to what was going on. He looked to Benjamin and was met with calm eyes and a relaxed posture.

“I attacked a family and failed to kill the son. I was ripped from my body and fled, not more than a spirit, in agony. Once I calmed down a bit, I could think clearly again after years of paranoia. I fled the country, ashamed of what I had done.”

He bowed his head, as if ashamed, hiding his glamoured eyes, waiting tensely what the reaction would be.

Fudge clearly was at a loss for words, trying to comprehend what he had been told.

Benjamin, meanwhile, was thinking. Was this what had happened? Had the Dark Lord encountered a cursed object and been affected, unable to save himself? It was clear that his Lord was different now, compared to what he had been before that cursed, or maybe blessed, night. He now was much more like the man his father had used to speak about, not the madman Benjamin met back when he had joined him. He came to the conclusion that he probably never would know whether the tale told in this office today was the truth or entirely fabricated. But he was sure that the story would fill its purpose, convincing the Minister of Magic that Tom Marvolo Riddle had never intended to become the Dark Lord Voldemort.

Marvolo let his gaze rise from the floor and took a sip from the cooling tea before resuming his story. Fudge still was gaping at the man before him like a fish out of the water.

“A year ago, one of the followers of the Dark Lord, back from the time I believe I was under the influence of some curse, found me where I was hiding out in a forest somewhere in Albania, I guess. He made me a temporary body for my spirit to reside in, and he spoke of plans to get me a body of my own. At this point I was desperate to gain corporeal form again. I would have agreed to anything to change my state.” he closed his eyes, appearing to struggle to keep his composure. “As soon as I could, I got away from the extremist and all he was plotting, all he had done, in search of someone friendly that could help.”

He smiled grateful at Benjamin at this point, who had to admire his Lord’s acting skills. And then they both turned to the Minister, watching the wheels turn in his head.

After several moments of tense silence they could watch as Cornelius Fudge rearranged the story that had been told, the facts he knew of, and his outlook on the world, to create a reality that brought him back on firm ground.

A young and promising wizard had had the bad luck to encounter a powerful curse that had made him do some horrible things. When his body had been destroyed, he had come to his senses again,
only to be brought back by a madman who would try to pressure him into continuing from the point that he had been at before he had vanished. His look fell on the scroll that lay forgotten on his desk. And there was the tool that he could use to make a powerful man indebted to him.

He smiled at his two guests and picked up the conversation again. “Black found you then, and made a body for you, in hopes of bringing terror back to our peaceful community.”

Confused, Marvolo had to ask “Regulus? I was under the impression that he died well before that night.”

Now it was Cornelius' turn to be confused. “No, I was speaking about Sirius Black, the older brother. He escaped from Azkaban almost two years ago.”

“But...” Marvolo did not try to hide how ridiculous this idea was. Sirius Black, a supporter of the Dark Lord?, “Sirius Black was never one of the Death Eaters.” He let his gaze wander between Benjamin and Cornelius in disbelief. “I was speaking of Peter Pettigrew.”

oooOOooo

The corridors in the dungeons were empty, as he expected them to be one week into the summer holidays. With his robes billowing behind him, Severus strode purposefully from his rooms up to the Headmaster's office. After his Lord had told him that he was free to go, he had first made a stop at Spinner's End, and then flooed promptly into his rooms at Hogwarts to find the Headmaster and report.

While he was walking the empty corridors he contemplated what to report and how. Should he report his suspicion that the Dark Lord was going a more political route this time around? Or should he only hint at it? With a start he realized that he had started to treat Albus as he did the Dark Lord, cautiously editing what to tell and what to hide, even going to lengths to hide certain information. After all, he had not told the Headmaster about the ultimatum that had been set for him. And he realised that he would not tell. He was wavering in his resolve... But no. He had to protect Harry Potter, and he was sure there was no way that he could protect the boy if he was to follow the Dark Lord again.

He reached the entrance hall and saw Minerva entering it at the same time, coming in from the grounds.

“Severus!” she exclaimed and made her way quickly through the hall to his side. A look of concern on her face, she almost started to drag him to the stairs up to the higher levels. “Let me get you to Poppy, and she will check you over. Are you terribly hurt?”

The Potions Master was unsure if he should laugh or roll his eyes at Minerva for her unnecessary concern. “Minerva, I am fine. There is no need for me to go to the infirmary or for you to play the mother hen.”

Disbelieving, the stern head of Gryffindor took a step back and gave her colleague a once over. “You look well. But you have been with him a week now. Excuse me, if I just cannot believe that you have been unscathed after so long a time there.”

Severus closed his eyes a moment, it would be nice if just once his word about how he was would be taken seriously. He conveniently forgot that he had a history of claiming to be fine even when it
was obvious he was not. Opening his eyes he saw the true concern on Minerva's face. He sighted, “I really am fine, Minerva. He left me alone most of the time, and in good shape. Otherwise I would have been incapable of doing what he wished me to do.” She still looked skeptical, so Severus changed the subject. “Have you seen Albus? I would like to tell him what information I could gather in the last seven days.”

“If he's not in his office, he is probably at headquarters, he told me over breakfast, that he had a meeting with some new members planned.”

Severus let his brows rise, conveying his question without a word. They both started to walk up the stairs, their steps echoing in the empty halls. The elves had already finished with the big cleanup after the school year.

“Albus found us a secure place for meetings and to use as a safehouse. I cannot tell you where it is, there was a fidelius placed there.” Severus acknowledged this with a nod, that would be the best, so he could not tell the Dark Lord and did not need to invent a plausible reason not to tell.

As neither was found of aimless small talk, the rest of their walk up to the Headmaster’s office was a silent one.

Luckily the gargoyle was not guarding the office during the summer holidays, so they did not have to use one of the ridiculous passwords Albus was so fond of. But the circular office filled with odd instruments and bright colours was empty. “It seems that we need to go to headquarters.” Minerva needlessly concluded. “I will gather something from my office and we will meet at the great doors?”

They parted after that, and the Potions Master strode through the empty halls back down to the entrance hall. There had to be an easier way to find some other Order members and alert their leader. After all, not all of them were able to conjure a corporeal Patronus, and it was not the best method to send a message unnoticed, either.

When Minerva joined him on the front steps, Severus was enjoying the sun on his face and the calm. It was never this peaceful here when students were on the grounds.

Minerva got a small piece of parchment from her robe pocket and held it out to Severus. They both started walking to the gates to get out from under the anti-apperation wards.

Severus took the parchment and immediately recognized the writing as the one of Albus. He had written The Order of the Phoenix has its headquarters at 12 Grimmauld Place in London. Severus repeatedly read the information, then set the piece of parchment on fire, letting the ashes fall to the ground and disappear among the grass.

“I have never been to this place.”

“I can side-along you there today, so you can go there on your own for following meetings.” Minerva was still not convinced that her younger friend was well... although he seemed to have no trouble keeping up with her brisk pace and looked rather healthy. As if he had seen more sun of late.

They talked about school for the rest of their walk, things like lesson plans, and items and supplies Severus would have liked to get for the potions laboratory, the fact that there were a few things for the school in general that needed replacement, students who had been a problem in the last year, and how they thought they should solve such problems in the new one.
Finally they reached the gates, stepped of the school grounds, and prepared to apparate to their destination. Were Minerva dropped him off to return to the school.

Severus was not pleased to realise that the Order's headquarters were located in the old Black town house. And that on entering he promptly run into the last Black.

“Snape, what are you doing here?” the dog animagus almost barked at him.

Smoothly he sidestepped the man and replied, “As Albus is here and I have reports to give, I think the reason for my presence in this ruin of a house should be obvious even to you.” Baiting the man was almost too easy now, just this one jipp and the man was growling, looking rather feral with his long hair – although it was washed and not as tangled any more – and gaunt face.

“Where is the Headmaster?” Severus asked, pitching his tone just right to convey that Black was rather unimportant, silently relishing the ability to get a bit of payback for all the times Black had humiliated him.

“Kitchen,” was his growled reply, inclining his head, Severus walked away without further greeting, down the dank hallway and a short staircase, following the scent of freshly brewed coffee.

Just inside the rather dark kitchen, the spy spotted the Headmaster reading a letter and getting up from his chair. Around the table were Alastor Moody and two others, a young witch with colourful hair – blue with purple tips – and a bald man with darker skin.

His robes billowing, he took a few steps into the kitchen as he was spotted by the Headmaster.

“Ah, Severus, my boy! I am sorry, but I fear I have no time to speak with you.” He folded the letter and tucked it into one of the pockets of his almost neon purple robes. “Is there anything of immediate importance you have to tell me?”

Severus weighed his options and observed the man before him closely. The Headmaster was nervous and with his thoughts elsewhere, so the Potions Master decided to keep the information short and to the point.

“I finished my task, and was allowed to leave. At the last meeting the Dark Lord asked that there should be a search for a boy able to speak with snakes. The Potter boy was mentioned and the search concluded the same evening. I am not aware of the reason of his interest in such a boy.” He spoke in a clipped tone, following Albus back into the entrance hall.

“We will speak more, when I’m back.” were the parting words of the Headmaster before he vanished through the door, not acknowledging the short report from his spy.

Severus sadly was not surprised. Was it a bad sign, that the leader of the light showed less concern for his spy's well-being after a week without contact, than a Dark Lord after only two missed meals? Severus felt torn and the ongoing changes made his head ache.

Shoving his doubts back in the dark corners of his mind, as he had to do much to often in the past days, he returned to the kitchen, to get some of the strong coffee he had smelled, and maybe one of the pastries, he had seen standing on the table. One could say many things about Molly Weasley, but she was really good at preparing any kind of food.

oooOooo
Marvolo stood in the hall of the Wizengamot and pretended to be amused by the stories the
Minister was telling. They were waiting for the Lords and Ladies to arrive so they could 'set all to
rights’ as the Minister had said before calling an emergency meeting.

As the Minister started to tell about the dignitaries he had met last year during the Quidditch World
Cup, Marvolo let his gaze wander over the seats of the Houses. There were so many seats that
remained empty. For one his seat, in the row nearest the centre, tarnished silver in need of a good
polishing, two coiled snakes with red gems as eyes holding their heads high supporting the bench,
and all the others. Why were they not claimed? Surely not all were forgotten? The Gaunts had
known they were descended from Salazar Slytherin, so why had they never claimed the seat? Did
they not know they could? Or did they not dare, because they lacked the money and education? He
wished he had thought to ask before killing the last of them. Now it was too late to get their
reasoning. But maybe he could get the reason for other empty seats, he decided to help find those
missing families, staring at the seat of the Prince house.

One after another the Lords and Ladies arrived and Marvolo concentrated more on his
surroundings. He reinforced the mask of young, nervous but confident wizard and followed the
Minister to the front, where guests and petitioners sat.

Benjamin stayed by his side to be the sponsor requesting this hearing as part of the Wizengamot.
The Minister was his second sponsor, as two were needed to get a hearing. But only the main one
would stand with the petitioner.

As he saw Lucius walking proudly into the chamber, Marvolo made a show of approaching him
reluctantly, as if unsure how he would be greeted. There was a brief flicker of surprise on the blond
Lord’s face, quickly replaced by a blank polite mask.

“Lord Malfoy, please allow me to express my sincere regret on how our last meetings went.”
Inwardly grinning, he portrayed the chagrined young man hoping to be pardoned. “I hope we will
be able to repair a relationship foolishly broken by past actions?”

There was turmoil in Lucius' eyes and Marvolo had to work to hide his smirk, it was quite fun to
pull the rug out under his Death Eaters' feet.

Regaining his composure and thinking his way through the maze that was his Lord’s plans Lucius
realised that this was the groundwork to make it possible for the Malfoys to be seen with the soon-
to-be Lord Slytherin in the future.

“We will have to see if past misconceptions can be cleared, and lost common ground regained.” He
gave a curt nod and strode away like a wary Lord not quite willing to associate with a wizard who
had placed him under the Imperius curse before. It went against all his instincts to turn his back on
his Lord and be arrogant in the way he spoke to him, but if there should be no doubt that the story
he had told was the truth, he would have to play the part.

Marvolo repeated the performance for all of his followers who had claimed to be under the mind-
controlling curse after he had vanished, relishing their mostly well hidden squirming. A truly
fitting punishment, and he would have the opportunity to keep at it for a while, he was looking
forward to many meetings with the others being uncomfortable and not able to show it.
Finally, the last living friend from his school days came into the chamber. Xerxes did put on a good show of seeing him and realising who he was. A cautious expression on his face, he came to Marvolo and Benjamin where they were standing, observed more or less obvious by all present. “Benjamin, how are you?” he greeted his younger friend, not acknowledging his Lord.

“I am well, Xerxes. I think you may know my guest of these last few days.” Benjamin said, indicating Marvolo standing by his side and going on “May I introduce Tom Marvolo Riddle. He came to me a few days ago, asking for help, to be declared alive again.”

Marvolo gave a small bow to his younger friend, who now seemed a lot older. “It has been a long time since we last saw each other.”

“A long time indeed. Why did you not come to me for help? I would have been glad to see you again, my friend.” The way Lord Lestrange held his body and the tone of his words conveyed, that he was disappointed and sad of the lack of trust, but his eyes told a different story. He was having fun with this as well.

“I was not sure I would be welcome at Lestrange Manor. There was this unfortunate business with your sons…” he let his voice trail away, practically radiating uncertainty.

“Well,” Xerxes hesitated and seemed to be weighing the man before him, “They acted against my wishes and warnings. More than once. And I will not hold you accountable for their decisions, nor your actions during the time you were not yourself.” With these words he patted the slightly shorter wizard on the shoulder, nodding to Benjamin, who tried to not show his astonishment, and made his way over to the Lestrange seat.

As Benjamin and Marvolo went to sit down, the last missing member came through the door. Dumbledore was in a bit of a hurry and tried to see what this so-called emergency meeting would be about. His gaze fell on the guest seats and he almost fell over his own feet as he recognized the young wizard sitting beside Lord Nott.

“Tom” mouthed the old Headmaster, stunned in place and staring at Marvolo, who chuckled quietly and whispered to his host, “It seems my old transfiguration teacher still remembers me. And he did not know I would be here today.”

Did Severus not tell the Headmaster that he had changed his plans? Or had they simply had no time to meet before Hogwarts' Headmaster had to leave?

As Chief Warlock Abbott called the session to order, Marvolo concentrated on the reactions of the present witches and wizards. How they reacted today was important, he would be able to see who was an ally, who was more neutral, and from whom he would probably never get help or support.

Benjamin started with stating why he had called for this hearing, explaining the law that was called upon, while the assistants levitated copies of the law and all cases it had been used for up to the members of the Wizengamot.

Soon they were lost in technicalities of the law and how they should know that it could be used in this situation, as they all could clearly see, that the man petitioning for its use had a body.

That was the moment Dumbledore stood and requested to be allowed to speak by raising his wand. “The floor goes to the Potter regent,” said Lord Abbott, gesturing to the white-haired wizard to speak.

“Thank you Chief Warlock.” He collected himself and started speaking to all in the chamber,
especially the more neutral Houses, as Marvolo noticed. “I remember a student by the name of Tom Marvolo Riddle, who looked a lot like this man.” He pointed at Marvolo, who was smiling. “He left school to become Lord Voldemort.” There went a shudder through the chamber at the name. “I indeed believe this man before us is no one else as the Dark Lord Voldemort, back as I have tried to tell you all for some weeks now.” His blue eyes were twinkling, and he seemed to be convinced that he was on top in this situation.

Someone from the lighter families called “Oh, don't start again. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is dead.” Marvolo could not see who had spoken, but murmurs from different others agreed with the interrupter.

Xerxes stood with a small smile on his face. “Well I have to agree with the Headmaster. Mister Riddle looks remarkable like my former school friend. Why do we not ask him? If he was not You-Know-Who, then why should he be here asking for a hearing based on this law?” he held the parchments up, that each of them had received. More agreeing murmurs were heard, and the Chief Warlock turned to the petitioner.

“Mr. Riddle, have you once been known by the name of Lord,” he hesitated, “You-Know-Who?”

Marvolo stood, respectfully nodding to the Chief Warlock. “Indeed I have been known as Lord Voldemort,” agitated murmurs started, and he had to raise his voice a little, “but that was before I lost my body and existed for over ten years as a bodiless spirit.”

This declaration set the kneazle among the pigeons, and all present Lords and Ladies started to speak agitatedly without listening to each other. It took several bangs from Abbott’s wand to get them to calm down again.

“We have two different members confirming the identity of Mr. Riddle and his word to being a bodiless spirit. Can you give us evidence on this?”

“I can,” confirmed Marvolo with a nod, quite amused by the dumbfounded expression on the old Headmaster's face. “In fact, I can provide a witness to my resurrection. As you all probably have guessed, a bodiless spirit cannot perform magic without help from a witch or wizard.”

That got him a few chuckles from his audience.

“Yesterday the man that made me a new body came after me. As he wanted me to continue from the point I were at when I vanished, and I did not, Benjamin refused him entry. And as he still tried to get to me, he stunned the man. If you want, we can bring him here.”

After this everything went smoothly, even if some of the members looked as if they had bitten into a lemon. Benjamin had one of his elves bring the bound Pettigrew to the chamber, resulting in another uproar that had to be called to order with stern words from the Chief Warlock. The unregistered animagus was bound with special cuffs, so he could not escape, and questioned under Veritaserum, confirming Marvolo’s story of being a bodiless spirit, which made the law of Haxby – the name of the foul wizard who had been the cause of its necessity – apply to him.

Dumbledore managed to get all of his records of the OWLs and NEWTs erased, by stating that the law made all actions performed before being reborn null and void. Marvolo did not try to protest, merrily asking instead for information what was necessary for him to take the exams. It was a hollow victory for the Potter regent, after all.

After all necessary papers had been filed, and the more or less agitated Lords and Ladies began to leave, Marvolo stepped up to the Minister, offering his hand to shake. “Thank you very much for
your help in this, Minister. I hope that we will work as well together in the future.”

Nodding happily, the Minister took the offered hand and smiled “Do let me know when you are taking your exams, Mr. Riddle. I would like to take you to a celebratory lunch after you have finished.”

Aware that Dumbledore was in hearing range, Marvolo smiled up at the Minister “That I will do. There is one more thing I would like to ask of you.” To the encouraging smile he continued “I am aware that there is a young wizard who is part of the Family, and living with muggles. I want to adopt him and need to know which department is the one responsible for this sort of things.”

“That would be the Department of Family Affairs. If you want to go right now, I can show you the way. Maybe you could tell me a bit more about your travelling, Mr. Riddle.”

As they departed, animately talking about old wizarding sites in foreign countries, Marvolo caught sight of one very white Albus Dumbledore, who was following him with horror in his eyes as all his carefully laid-out plans began to crumble right in front of him.

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
Amelia Bones, head of the DMLE – short for Department of Magical Law Enforcement – strode into her office, stripping off her purple Wizengamot robes. Whoever thought it a good idea to choose this colour for the robes of Ministry officials for Wizengamot meetings was probably still laughing. Almost nobody looked good in this colour.

Moments ago she had sent one of her Aurors to take Peter Pettigrew to one of the holding cells, with special instructions to make sure the Animagus did not escape. In his rat form he just was so small that slipping away would be easy for him.

This day had been a difficult one up till now. She still had trouble to wrap her mind around everything that had happened. You-Know-Who back, and free to go and do what he pleased because of a forgotten old law. Peter Pettigrew not dead but very much alive. The declared newly-born man claiming that Sirius Black had never been a follower of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. There were many questions swirling about in her mind.

She resolved to start at the beginning, by reading up on the transcripts of Sirius Black’s trial. She didn't remember anything about it, but that was not really surprising, it had been a rather hectic time. She had hardly made it home to sleep and change her clothes in those days. She just had not been able to follow all of the trials that had been held.

With new resolve she made her way to the file storage rooms. It would be an enraged and confused Madame Bones coming back to her office in the evening, after discovering that there never had been a trial for Sirius Orion Black, just an order to take him to Azkaban. That would be the start of a rather thorough investigation. She did not know what to do should she discover that there had been an innocent man in Azkaban for all these years.

It was hot in little Whinging where the teenage boy trotted along the side walk, carrying two heavy bags of lemonade and sweets.

Harry had had an odd day. While doing the dishes, he had been overcome by a fierce gleeful joy that was definitely not his own. No one would be this happy with both hands stuck in hot soapy water in what was called the hottest summer since start of records.

It had happened again while Harry had been washing his uncle’s car for the third time this week, another activity that was unable to inspire much happiness in Harry.

He worried, as these emotions were not his, that could only mean that Voldemort was really happy. And if a happy Dark Lord was no reason for concern, then nothing was. He sighed. As usual, the letters from Hermione and Ron were empty of any real information. They did not tell where they were staying or what they were doing. Sirius was equally scarce with information of any value. All
his letters, with the exception of those from Hermione, were short and filled with frustratingly unclear hints that he would be allowed to stay with them, wherever they might be, sometime this summer. And his plan to listen to the news had not gone well. The Dursleys were not happy for him to stay in the living room with them to watch the news. They always sent him away with suspicion in their faces. His backup plan to read the newspaper only ended with his being smacked over the head with the rolled-up information source.

Setting down the bags, filled with snacks Dudley had asked his mother for, Harry flexed his fingers. The bags were a little too heavy for the flimsy handles, which were cutting into his palms. Standing up straighter, Harry’s back gave a series of cracks, and sweat ran down his brow. If he was lucky, he would have to stay here away from magic and his friends only two more weeks, more or less. And the time would be easier if he did not anger his relatives. Sighing again, he picked the bags back up and continued his way. Some of the neighbours crossed to the sides of the street and Harry snorted a bitter laugh. Well, he looked like a criminal in his much-too-big faded t-shirt and baggy jeans. If he was to meet a boy in such clothes, whom rumours claimed went to a school for incurably criminal boys, he would also try to avoid him.

Life was not fair and would probably never be.

The sun was nearing the horizon as he finally reached number four. His cousin was not back yet, and Aunt Petunia was unhappy with how long it had taken her nephew to get the small purchase done.

“Hurry up, boy! Your uncle and cousin will be back soon, and the living room needs cleaning. But first wash your filthy hands!”

Staying as calm as possible Harry just said “Yes, Aunt Petunia,” and went to pack the many sweets away before going to the bathroom. He really hoped that he only had to stay here two more weeks. He doubted that he could manage to stay calm for the rest of summer.

oooOOooo

Vernon was just back from work and reading the newspaper that he had not finished over breakfast, as an owl swept through the open window to perch on the back of one of the chairs nearest to Harry, who was doing the dishes – again.

“Get this dirty bird out of my kitchen!” screeched Petunia at the top of her lungs, startling the bird and her husband... who managed to upend his mug of coffee over himself. Vernon cursed loudly and jumped up, dropping the newspaper. Harry hurried to get the letter from the nondescript brown owl that was just too happy to leave again, not waiting to see if there would be treats or even water. As normally owls would arrive late in the evening or early in the morning, Harry proceeded to open the letter without getting away from his relatives first.

It was a letter from the Headmaster. Before he could start to read he had to duck a swinging hand from his uncle. With a few quick steps he brought the table between himself and his irritated relatives. Tuning out their shouts and insults, he quickly scanned the letter.

Dear Harry,
Please prepare to be picked up later this evening. There will be a group of people you know coming to your relatives’ house. Do not leave with anyone else! Stay indoors and be ready to leave on a moment’s notice! Do not leave without the people I send!

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

The letter was odd. But the content probably would help calm his relatives down. With an uneasy feeling in his stomach, Harry looked up at his aunt and uncle. They both were now silently fuming, it seemed they had realized that all windows were open, so that the whole neighbourhood could hear them if they were shouting as they had been only moments before.

“The Headmaster sent this letter. I will be picked up later today. He said I should pack and be ready to leave.” Harry felt a slight pang in his heart as he saw the relieved look on Petunia’s face and the loathing on Vernon’s face.

“Well, what are you waiting for then?” growled the obese man, his face gaining a purple tinge. “Pack what's yours and be on your way! And don't think that you'll be welcome here ever again!”

Silently Harry turned and made his way up to his room. Starting to pick up his textbooks and all the other things, he tried to concentrate, his mind began turning over the puzzle before him. Voldemort had been happy today. Very happy, on more than one occasion. And now he got a letter, a hurried letter, from the Headmaster, telling him that he would be picked up from his relatives'. There had been hints that he would be able to be with his friends sometime in the summer. But he had never left before he had spent at least three weeks at Privet Drive. There had to be a connection between those two things. Voldemort happy and Harry leaving his relatives early. The raven-haired teen slowly straightened, his eyes going wide and his transfiguration textbook from second year falling from his limp fingers to the ground. He was no longer safe here. Somehow Voldemort had found a way to get to Harry, and now they were trying to get him to safety.

With this realisation, he began to pack frantically, no longer trying to get a little order into his belongings, just making sure he had everything ready in the shortest amount of time possible. He pried open the loose floorboard to get to his most prized possessions. The album with photos of his parents, the invisibility cloak, the map and his wand. Album and map he placed in his trunk and squashed a few things so he could close it, the cloak he laid on the bed beside him, the wand he kept in his hand. Now he was ready to leave, or ready to fight, if Voldemort or his Death Eaters made it here first.

Sitting on his bed listening to the sounds outside, Harry was tense with nervousness. He heard Dudley come home and enter the house, heard the Dursleys eating and then settling into the living room to have a family film evening. It got dark outside, and the street lamps were turned on, and still Harry was waiting, almost shaking with anticipation.

Nearly three hours after the letter came, the head with a mop of black hair snapped up. Had he heard someone apparate? Only moments later there was a knock on the door to the garden and Harry was on his feet, wand in hand and cloak thrown over his shoulders.

“Who could that be?” asked Vernon downstairs.
“I do not know, dear. Stay, I'll have a look.” Petunia answered.

“I want more popcorn.” demanded Dudley.

With a start, Harry realized that his relatives could be in danger if there were Death Eaters at the door. Than he scolded himself silently, Death Eaters wouldn't have the decency to knock. They would blast the door off its hinges and curse whatever or whoever they found behind it.

“Mrs. Dursley?” Harry heard the voice of a woman politely ask after his aunt had opened the door. “We are here to collect your nephew.”

Impatient, Harry could practically see her waving her hand for the woman to come inside as Petunia spat out, “Come indoors before someone sees.”

Cautiously Harry got up from his bed, put the hood of the cloak over his head, and opened his door slowly so he could pass through. After a surprisingly long time, the back door was closed again, and a clearly unhappy Petunia called “Come down here, boy!”

Unsure these were really the people sent by Professor Dumbledore to pick him up, Harry slowly made his way to the top of the stairs, so he could look down on the group assembled there.

Four persons were standing beside his aunt, only two of whom he had seen before. Remus Lupin in patched robes that were a little threadbare at the hems, and Alastor Moody, easily recognized by his peg leg and the swirling blue magical eye. The other two, a young woman with a heart-shaped face and hair with wild curls in a tomato red, and a bald, dark-skinned wizard, he had not seen before.

Alastor’s eye rested on Harry, and the teen remembered that it was able to see through his cloak. The old wizard nodded approvingly and a small smirk flickered across his scar-littered face. “Right you are Potter! Constant vigilance!”

Slowly Harry slit the hood from his head, still holding his wand steadily trained on the three wizards and one witch standing beside his aunt.

“Professor Lupin, please tell me what you used to teach me extra lessons.” Smiling, Lupin took a step towards the stairs and answered, “A boggart.” Harry relaxed a bit, but did not let his guard down.

“And now a question from us,” Moody intercepted before Harry could start to descend the stairs. “Wouldn't do if we brought a Death Eater to headquarters, now, would it? Or does one of you have some Veritaserum on hand?”

Both the young woman and the dark wizard shook their heads.

With another smile Lupin turned to Harry and asked “What form does your patronus take?” “A stag,” was the nervous answer, bringing a brilliant smile to Lupin’s face.

“It is he.”

“Well, we need to be on our way then. Ma'am, sorry for interrupting your evening. We'll be gone in moments. Are you all packed, Potter?” Harry nodded while the horse-faced Petunia shoot hateful glares at the four magical people invading her home, before she retreated into the living room back to her family.

“I have everything packed. Why are we in such a hurry? Where are we going? What..”
But Mad Eye cut him short. “No time for this now, lad. Get your things. Tonks help him.”

Smiling, the young woman in jeans and t-shirt made her way up to Harry. “Show me the way?”

A little stunned by the abrupt manner, Harry nodded and lead the way.

Tonks looked around his room curiously and cast a quick charm on the trunk. “Now it will be lighter, easier to handle.” She led her gaze wander through the room once more. “Got everything?”

“Yes, I was packed not half an hour after I received the letter. Why are you so late?”

Picking up the trunk between them she said cheerily “Had to wait until it was dark. We can't risk the muggles seeing anything.” She almost fell over her own feet. “Uh, sorry, maybe I should levitate your trunk?” Harry nodded and let go of the handle, he didn't fancy falling down the stairs.

Only moments later they all were standing in the back garden. “Introductions later. Do you have your broom?” Harry held up the requested item. “Great. We'll fly a bit, then apparate you to our destination. Read this.” Alastor got a piece of parchment from his robes and trust it at Potter. It was the same piece of parchment most of the Order had been shown to inform them where headquarters was. Then Moody set the parchment on fire and rapped his wand rather hard on the top of the boy’s head. Harry shuddered at the odd sensation of something cold running in drops down his body. And as he looked down at his body he gave a startled cry, because he looked like the wall of the house behind him.

The dark-skinned wizard conjured a net to transport Harry’s trunk in and secured it to his own broom.

“Let’s get in the air everyone!” The adults had taken a broom each, which had been leaning against the wall, and started to mount them. On Alastor’s signal they all pushed themselves in the air and started to follow Tonk's lead. Despite the worries of what Voldemort was up to, if his relatives would be all right, and what would be happening from now on, Harry was happy to be flying again. It had been not two weeks since he had last been able to fly, but after a year of almost weekly quidditch practices, two weeks were a long time.

They were not flying long before Tonks started to descend somewhere out in the open, a field of some sort. They landed near a small copse of birch trees and hornbeam. The spell on Harry was reserved, and Remus stepped up to him as Tonks spun on her heel and vanished from view.

“Am I right assuming that you've never been taken anywhere by side-along apparation?” Remus asked Harry in a quiet tone.

“As I don’t know what apparation is, I’m not sure.”

Remus chuckled. “Apparation is a form of magical transportation. We will vanish here, like Tonks did, and appear in another spot almost exactly in the same moment. It's not a nice feeling the first few times, and to be taken along by someone else is worse than doing it alone. Once you turn seventeen you'll be able to learn to do it on your own.” The werewolf held his arm out for Harry to take who did so with apprehension. “Keep a strong hold on my arm and a firm grip on your broomstick.”

And then Lupin spun, much as Tonks had done, and Harry suddenly felt as if he were being sucked through an incredibly small rubber tube that tried to squish him into the smallest space he could possibly fit. In a way it took almost forever before it was over, even if it was at most a few
And then they were standing in a dimly lit street in a city, by the sound of traffic somewhere in the distance, and Harry was desperately trying not to retch. Not really recovered from his first travel by apparation, Moody came over and shooed them in the direction of the houses on the other side of the narrow street. “Don’t dawdle, move!” And so Harry stumbled over his own feet, not paying attention to his surroundings, dragged by Remus up a short staircase and through a dark door.

oooOOooo

Hermione was trying to concentrate on her potions essay, but while Ron was pacing up and down it was nearly impossible.

“Ron calm down! Harry won’t get here any faster if you walk to Hogwarts in this room.”

With a frustrated huff, Ron slumped down on his untidy bed. “I know! But I can’t stay sitting. I just can’t!” He ran his hands through his red hair, making it stand up at odd angles. “I don’t think I’ll be calm until Harry is here and safe!”

They both were confined to the rooms they were sleeping in, as almost none of the other rooms were safe yet. The kitchen was, but there Snape was sitting with a cup of strong coffee, dissuading all of the students from staying in there. So they had opted for Ron’s room, that he would be sharing with Harry, to wait for their friend's arrival.

Hermione had been staying at Order headquarters for three days now, helping to clean the place to make it fit for human habitation. Today they – that is Ron, Ginny, the twins, and herself – had been cleaning a living room at the ground floor under Mrs. Weasley’s supervision, when Dumbledore had come back from the surprise Wizengamot meeting he had been called to. He had been unusually pale and had called all order members present to the kitchen. Then they had launched into a flurry of activity, watched by the baffled teenagers.

All they could learn, before they were sent to their rooms, was that Dumbledore had decided rather spontaneously that Harry should come to Grimmauld place. It had now been almost an hour since the four sent to get Harry had left and they all were rather nervous.

With a sigh Hermione set her quill down, it was futile to work on her summer assignments while this distracted.

“Want to play a game of exploding snap or something?” asked Ron, lying on his back, staring at the flaking paint on the ceiling.

“Better than staring at the walls.” agreed Hermione as she stood to get the pack of cards from the board by the door.

They had just started to deal the cards when the late Mrs. Black started to screech at the top of her painted lungs. Both of them shot up from their seat on the bed, now a little tidied up, and rushed from the room and down the stairs. They were meet by both twins and Ginny and stared down into the hall at the new arrivals.

Moody was going into the kitchen, and Tonks was just getting up from the floor where she had found herself after tripping over the umbrella stand she always tripped over. And there, just inside
the door, stood Harry, supported by Professor Lupin and looking like he was going to be sick any moment now.

“Harry!” Ginny exclaimed and stormed down the stairs, barrelling into the surprised boy, who would have fallen if the werewolf standing by his side had not helped him stay upright.

“Go easy on him, Miss Weasley!” chastised Lupin, “Let him breath!”

A little embarrassed, Ginny stepped back, and Harry tried to arrange his mused clothes back into a semblance of order. During this display by his younger sister, Ron had come down to greet Harry, giving him a hug, closely followed by Hermione, who did the same. The friends started to go to the kitchen as Professor Dumbledore came out the door followed by Sirius.

“Harry! I’m sooo glad that you are here now.” with a few long strides, the still to thin man had passed the Headmaster and enveloped his godson in a big hug. “Are you well? You look a bit pale.”

As Harry could not answer the question pressed against his godfathers robes Remus answered with a small chuckle “Apparation does not agree with him.”

Harry felt better now that he was safe and back with his friends and what remained of his family. Grateful he smiled up at Sirius, who smiled back. But this happy moment could not last, as the Headmaster said with a stern voice, so unlike him, “All order members, please come to the kitchen. We have much to discuss.” And with a flourish of his robes he turned to return to the kitchen, only to be stopped by Sirius.

“I want Harry to be part of the meeting. He needs to know what is happening and what we are doing.”

Warmth spread through Harry, here was someone not thinking of him as a child, someone not willing to keep him in the dark, to protect him, only for him to be in the thick of it regardless.

“Only Order members Sirius, my boy.” Now the white-haired wizard sounded like the kindest grandfather again. “The children surely want to catch up. Molly can send them some sandwiches upstairs.” He looked smiling and with twinkling eyes in Mrs. Weasley's direction and she promptly nodded cheerfully.

“Of course, Headmaster, go on, all of you. Sandwiches will be served in Ron’s and Harry’s room in a few minutes.”

A fast glance between Harry and his godfather assured the boy that he would get to know everything after the meeting. And so he left with his friends without making a fuss.

Halfway up the stairs, Fred and George came up on both sides of Harry, whispering to him, “If you want to hear what they're talking about - “ “- we can offer you our service.”

The twin on Harry’s right side flashed a flesh-coloured and wound-up cord, that he held hidden in his hand.

“Extendable Ears,” explained the twin on the other side. “We invented them. Wonderful if you want to listen in on conversations.”

Reaching the top, Harry smiled at them “Thanks guys, but Sirius will tell me afterwards. So no need to risk getting in trouble. Let’s eat the sandwiches, and you tell me where we are and what you've been up to.” With the promise to get to know, he was much more at ease and happy to be
with his friends. Moments later they were sitting on the beds in their room, listening to stories from the few short weeks of summer so far. Harry learned that his friends had been told by Dumbledore not to tell him anything that could be of use to Voldemort and his followers, for the unlikely reason that one of the owls might be intercepted.

In the kitchen all the witches and wizards that were part of the Order of the Phoenix settled around the big table. The Potions Master and spy was sitting down, not his usual position. At least not in the last war. When he had attended meetings back at that time, he had always tried to be one of the last to arrive and one of the first, if not the first, to leave. And he preferred a place in the shadows to one in the middle of the group, like the one he had now. But as he had been waiting the whole day, sitting in the kitchen, drinking coffee and eating the delicious pastries, it would look odd to leave his place to hide in the shadows now. And so he just did the best to put his customary sneer on his face and ignore the others.

They all watched with wary faces as the Headmaster sat down in his conjured armchair, for once looking his age. “I sadly have to tell you that Tom Riddle, better known as Lord Voldemort is once again able to wander freely.” That brought commotion to the room, all of them were speaking over each other demanding to know how this was even possible. Holding one hand up, Dumbledore silenced them all. “Severus my boy, you did not tell me that he once again looks like a normal human.” The look the Headmaster gave his Potions Professor was one of disappointment.

And here we go again, Severus thought wryly. “I told you this morning, that I had accomplished the task that had been set for me. As I told you previously what this task was, I foolishly believed that the implications were clear.”

Albus nodded sadly. “Well it seems I was in a bit of a hurry this morning, my boy. Please be so kind as to give a full report now.”

Severus preferred to give this reports in private, as Albus most certainly knew, but at the moment he could do nothing but comply.

“Very well.” Severus took a sip from his coffee, and hid a grimace as it turned out to be cold. “The last week I spent in the same house as the Dark Lord. He provided me with everything I needed to create a potion to reverse the negative effects of the errors in the potion used in his resurrection.”

He took another sip from his cold coffee. “During this time, he behaved differently than I remember. There was only one meeting called that I was part of. Yesterday evening, all were called to give reports and receive orders. At the end of the meeting, the Dark Lord gave all of us the order to search for a boy that was a Parselmouth. One of the others informed him that Mr. Potter has this ability. After the meeting I was asked to confirm or refute this information. I had to provide him with my memory of the disaster of a duelling club. This morning I was informed that I could leave. I came here in search of you, Albus, immediately.” That were the bare bones of the things Severus had seen and heard, but most of the others only were speculations and interpretations of his own. No need to share them with all of the others.

“Have you any idea of his plans Severus? It is of highest importance that we learn of his plans. He changed them somehow, and I am concerned what he is planning.”
Trying to stay calm, wondering what the old manipulative twinkly-eyed man keep from them, Severus answered, “I suspect that he is going a less violent way to get what he wants, at the moment. The tasks he set at the last meeting, and the fact that he refrained from using the Cruciatus as often, suggests a shift in his approach.”

“Then now is my time to give a report,” Dumbledore sighed sadly. “As you all know, there was an emergency Wizengamot meeting this morning.” Nodding heads all around the table answered. “It was called from two members, Lord Nott and the Minister himself, on behalf of a petitioner, who wanted to call to the law of Haxby. I was shocked, as I recognized Tom Riddle, who once was a student of mine, sitting in front of everyone. I tried to get the others to see reason, but alas, they were stubborn and with Lord Abbott as Chief Warlock I had no way to stop this scheme.”

The young woman at the end of the table, whose name was Nymphadora Tonks, as Severus had learned during his agonizing hours of waiting, let her hair shift to a ghastly green and asked with a frown “Could you please tell us what this law of Haxby is?” There were some murmurs around the table while Severus tried to get an idea of what the Headmaster still had not told them. A short sweeping glance over the assembled Order revealed that Arthur Weasley was missing.

“All faces went pasty white at this, all to clear were the consequences of Lord Voldemort being declared free of all responsibility for past actions.

“But that is not the worst,” Albus added in a grave tone. “At the end of the meeting, after he was granted what he came for, I overheard him talking with the Minister. He asked for instructions on what was the procedure for adopting a child.”

Severus knew instantly what his Lord was planning to do and started to panic while Molly asked confused, “Why would he want to adopt a child? And which child would he adopt, and on what grounds?”

“I think that he plans to adopt Harry, claiming that the boy is part of the Slytherin family.”

A moment of shock was swiftly followed by an uproar of voices shouting desperate plans into the room, trying to come up with something they could do to keep Harry out if the clutches of Lord Voldemort.

Severus was an island of calm in all the commotion. But only on the outside. In his mind the desperate shouts were echoed by his thoughts. The ultimatum given by his Lord now seeming to be meaningless, because he would die for not protecting the boy before the time was up. There was no way he could save the boy. They could try to imprison him here at headquarters, only to become wanted for keeping a child from their legal guardian. The same was true if they ran. He was no fool and knew that the department of family affairs always decided in favour of the old families.

In this moment Arthur came into the kitchen discarding his robes and looking around for his wife. While one after the other the enraged order members became quiet and shifted their attention to the wizard standing just inside the door, Severus started with breathing exercises to get a handle on his irrational fear. He did not know that the Dark Lord planed to kill Potter, his plans could be different, and until he did not know one way or the other, there was no use in panic.

“But Arthur, what have you heard? Were you able to speak with someone from the department of...
“family affairs?” Albus asked with his grandfatherly mask firmly in place.

“Yes, I spoke with Amanda Wisby, she handles most of the cases involving children. She told me about the ‘handsome and kind’ Mr. Riddle coming into the office just before lunch.” He rubbed his eyes behind his glasses. “Tomorrow in the afternoon is the appointment. I asked if this wasn’t too fast, if there isn’t a need for some form of inspection.”

He shook his head sadly, “She said he asked for the earliest appointment possible, so that he has more time with his son before the boy has to go back to Hogwarts for the next school year.” Defeated, Arthur sank into a chair next to his wife. “I don't think that there is anything within the law we can do to prevent Harry from being adopted.”

“It is Harry than that Tom seeks to adopt?”

Arthur only nodded to the Headmasters question.

His emotions under his control again the spy analysed this new information. Again, proof that the Dark Lord had changed his behaviour. No, he certainly could not guess what he wanted to achieve by adopting Potter.

A number of smaller discussions started around the room, tossing ideas back and forth on how to keep Potter with them. Suddenly the door slammed open and a fuming Potter strode in the room, clutching a crushed parchment in his left hand. “You think it is alright to not tell me that there is someone trying to adopt me? Think it's okay to shoo me away to play while the monster that murdered my parents tries to get the Ministry to just hand me over!? I say that is NOT OKAY!”

“Now my boy...” Albus tried to placate the enraged and distraught teen, but he would have none of it.

“I am almost fifteen, not three. Keeping me in the dark didn't work well in the past, and with something as important as this, you try again?” Harry narrowed his eyes at the Headmaster and turned to his godfather. “I would like to speak with you, Sirius.” Nodding, the Animagus stood and followed Harry out of the kitchen, past the other teens standing sheepishly in the door.

“How does he know?” asked Kingsley from his chair next to Moody.

“Probably got a notification letter from the Ministry. Albus you adjusted the wards to let ministry owls pass, did you not?” The old Auror answered.

Nodding, Albus rose from his chair, probably to go and speak with Potter, but stopped by Severus first. “Severus do you think it possible…”

With a curt not, the Order’s only spy stood and swept and out of the room and the dusty house. He stood for a moment in the fresher air outside – only fresh in the sense of free of dust as it was quite hot – collecting his thoughts and strengthening his shields before apparating away.

Sitting in the study Benjamin had picked for him, Marvolo made a list of everything that needed to be done in the next few days. It was quite long already, but most of it he could not start until later the next day, as the presence of his heir was needed for this. A small smile graced his face, and he
called “Come in!” to the short, firm knock on the door.

In came Severus, only to kneel, bowing his head on the spot.

“I take you have news for me, Severus? Come, have a seat. Tea?”

A little baffled and quickly hiding it, Severus rose and went to sit in the chair in front of the desk Marvolo was sitting behind.

Conjuring another teacup, Marvolo asked his Potions Master “Milk? Sugar? Lemon?”

“Milk, my Lord. Thank you.”

It was obvious to Marvolo that he had caught the man off guard, and he was terribly amused by this. The normally so composed head of House Slytherin off balance was a rare sight indeed. After they both had a cup of tea Marvolo kept his inquisitive gaze on the younger man and waited for him to begin.

“The Order had an emergency meeting only moments ago. In fact, Dumbledore,” he added a sneer to the name, “sent me here to gather information.”

“To learn of my plans after I have adopted the last Potter?” interrupted the red-eyed wizard. “Yes, my Lord.”

“And you are curious as well?” He rose a brow and shot his follower a knowing look.

“Of course I am, my Lord. It is a most elaborate scheme I would very much like to be a part of.” the black-haired man flinched almost none noticeable, as this boldness could have painted a target on him if Marvolo had still been who he was before that night.

“Well, I think you are the best man to answer one of my questions at the moment.” He picked the quill back up and made a tick on one of the lines on his list. “As head of House Slytherin at Hogwarts, you should know how a parent can get an evaluation of their child’s grades, troubles, achievements, their general conduct at school?”

Severus blinked several times, confused by this seemingly random change in topic, taking a sip of his tea and clearing his throat. “A formal letter to the Head of House of the student in question asking for all desired information should suffice, my Lord. Why do you...” Marvolo watched with amusement as the professor caught up to what was happening and his eyes widened before he managed to calm his features again.

“Well, Severus, as you are teaching Potions, I will give you a little head start to gather the information needed. Tomorrow at this time I will be father to one of your students, and as the next year is the boy’s OWL year,” the almost question was answered with a tiny nod from Severus, “I wish to know if he needs tutoring in any of his classes. It will not do that he embarrasses me with mediocre performance, if he could do better.”

More or less quickly adjusting to the new situation, Severus recalled everything he had seen from Potter before and sorted through the information to form a coherent report of sorts. “I am afraid that I have only limited knowledge of Mr. Potter’s academic performance. He is average at potions, but that might be influenced by my dislike of him and the fact his Slytherin year-mates relish taunting him. Up until now he was living with his mother’s relatives, his aunt I think, who are muggles. So he was not able to do more than theory during the summer breaks.” A sneer settled firmly on the Potion Master’s face “But I doubt he ever made much of an effort. He stays in the castle for most of the breaks, does not have many friends, and was more than once a target for ridicule from other
“Very well. I am curious what the other teachers will have to say about him. You can tell the esteemed Headmaster that I intend to raise the boy as my son and heir. I need one so I can claim the title of Lord Slytherin, and as procreation is a rather lengthy process, especially in my case, as I have no spouse, finding a child meeting the requirements was plan A. I am happy that plan B is not needed.” The playful smile vanished as Marvolo opened one of the drawers of the desk and took out a small vial filled with a silver mist that was swirling and shimmering.

“As I am not certain if it would benefit you or not, I decided to let you decide if you want to see my memories of that night.” He set the small vial in front of Severus on the desk and continued in a quiet, contemplative voice. “I think your request is what saved young Harry’s life. Never before had a parent been given the choice. I asked her to step aside three times, she did not. I think that was the difference.”

Taking the vial and pocketing it, Severus stood and bowed. “Potter was not happy that the Headmaster tried to keep the pending adoption from him. The last I saw, he was fuming in righteous anger. The boy is staying at headquarters, they are thinking of maybe hiding him.” Waiting to be dismissed, Severus stayed by his chair.

“If they try,” a small disk was thrown Severus’ way and he caught it with his good reflexes, trained in years of keeping students from blowing up themselves “twist the rings on this to inform me.”

Bowing a last time, Severus left and Marvolo started to work on his list again, smiling to himself. All his plans were going well. There was benefit in a sound mind.

Chapter End Notes

Did you notice what was not told in the order meeting? That will not work well old man ;)

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Breakfast the next morning at Grimmauld Place was a bleak affair. Molly Weasley tried to cheer every one up, but her smiles were strained, and her voice betrayed her anxiety. Harry was sitting beside Ron and across from Hermione, stirring his porridge listlessly.

“Harry dear, you need to eat something!” Ron’s mother picked up a bowl of fruit and placed it in front of the pale teen.

Refilling his mug from the coffee pot, Sirius stood and went around the table to sit on Harry’s other side. “Did you sleep at all last night, pup?” Shaking his head no, Harry let himself slump down and lean against his godfather. “At least not much. Why is my life always this…” he paused, desperately trying to come up with an adequate word. Not wanting to lie, Sirius tried a reassuring pat to Harry’s arm.

Sensing that here was a situation needing a good talk without an audience, Molly started to herd her children, and Hermione, out of the kitchen to give the both of them a little privacy. “Come along, everyone, the parlour isn’t going to clean itself.” As Harry started to get up too, the matron added “Finish your breakfast first, Harry dear,” before bustling out of the kitchen after the other teens, closing the door behind her.

Making an effort to eat at least a few spoonfuls of his porridge, Harry sat at the table beside the man who was the closest thing to family that he had, a not entirely comfortable silence stretching between them.

As he finally gave up on finishing his meal – his stomach just did not feel up to eat anything – Harry stood to join the others in their quest to make this house habitable. He had almost reached the door when it swung inward, admitting his Potions Professor.

“Black, Mr. Potter.” The dour man nodded in greeting. “I want to speak with Mr. Potter.” He shot a sour glance at the wizard still sitting at the table nursing his mug. “Alone, if you do not mind.”

“But I do mind,” answered Sirius, standing from his chair with suspicion clear on his gaunt face. “If you want to speak with my godson, I will be there too!”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Snape sighed “Very well.” He motioned for Harry to sit down again and followed him to the table, to start pacing in front of the other two. Spinning with billowing robes, to face his student, the professor took a deep breath. “Do you know about my position?”

Harry was surprised. Why would the professor, who so obviously hated him, want to speak with him in private, and then accept when Sirius refused to leave? Slowly nodding, Harry sat down in the chair he had sat in earlier. “You are a spy, sir. Not that anyone told me anything. But I was not totally unaware at the start of summer.” The teen fixed his professor with a questioning gaze, “But I do not know for which side you're actually working.” At this Sirius snorted snidely.

Harry wasn't sure, but for a moment he thought he saw a brief flicker of surprise in the dark eyes of his teacher. But as he continued to talk, he was hiding again behind his customary blank mask. “If either of them would come to question my loyalty, I would be in grave danger.” That got another
snort out of Sirius, he could not refrain from making a comment, but choose not to interrupt the Potions Master with words. Harry understood plainly enough without needing more explanation from Professor Snape. If Voldemort would suspect him, he would die, and probably not as fast as he would like. And if Dumbledore should come to doubt him... well, Harry wasn't sure what would happen then, but Azkaban and the Dementors were a possibility. As the Professor seemed to wait for a response from him, Harry nodded.

Satisfied, the spy continued, “Yesterday evening I went to report the reaction of the Order and the Headmaster. He...” Here the Potions Master closed his eyes briefly. “I do not think, that the Dark Lord intends to kill you, Mr. Potter. He asked after your grades, and what a parent would have to do to get a complete evaluation of their child's performance in class.”

The young wizard was out of balance and desperately trying to understand. What was his Professor trying to tell him?

Sirius, on the other hand, was not speechless. “What are you trying to tell us, Snivellus? Why should your master change his mind about Harry? He's tried to kill my godson three times now. If you have nothing useful to say, leave!” The voice of the animagus rose in volume toward the end of his speech, and he bristled in anger as he was ignored.

“Try to behave respectfully, Potter. The Dark Lord never was a patient man. Show respect, restrain your temper, and remember that you are not truly alone.” Harry stood open-mouthed in the face of the softly spoken words.

Turning from the dumbfounded teen to the pissed-off animagus, Severus changed his tone back to the well known drawl. “Albus told me that there is a potions lab in this ruin, where can I find it?”

“Out the door, left, down the stairs.” Sirius’ voice was full of anger, and his desire to hex the insensitive spy was evident from the white knuckles of the hand clutching his wand.

Without more words, or any form of greeting, the Potions Master left the room, leaving behind an enraged animagus and a bewildered teen.

ooOoo

Outside the door, Severus took several deep breaths, to calm down, before he went to inspect the potions lab. He had done what he could to increase the boy’s chance of surviving. Now only hope remained that he actually had interpreted the Dark Lord’s plans in the right way. Steeling his nerves and pushing the unwanted and unhelpful doubts into the depths of his mind behind his shields, he started on the self-imposed task to have a reason to stay at headquarters, until it was time for Harry to leave for his appointment at the Ministry. Checking that the disk was still in his pocket, he drew his wand and opened the door cautiously.

ooOoo

In the kitchen Harry tried to wrap his mind around the warning?... advice?... the Head of Slytherin had just given him. And pondering the words, Harry realized that the man had not said to which of
his masters he actually was loyal. But his last words could be interpreted as a promise to help Harry if need be. The teen was not sure, but it would match the pattern. Professor Snape had helped him in more than one dangerous situation, like the broom incident in his first year. While Harry was deep in thought, Sirius was rambling on about greasy-haired bothers under his breath.

Neither had much more time to ponder over the strange words of Severus Snape, as the old and wrinkled house-elf Kreacher popped into the kitchen. He held a scroll of parchment tightly to his tea-towel-clad chest. He was decidedly dirty, his tea towel more of a brownish-gray than the white it had probably started out with. “Master has letter from Ministry,” he told them in a respectful tone and bowed, adding in a clear to understand mock-whisper. “Great disappointment for his mother, he was. What would mistress does? All this ghastly folk coming into respectable Noble and Ancient House of Black.”

Ignoring the ramblings of the old elf, Sirius snatched the parchment from the spindly fingers, curiosity getting the better of him. He briefly looked at the seal, recognizing the colour and design as the one used by the DMLE. Belatedly realizing he ought to check the missive for nasty spells and curses first, he drew his wand – sadly not the one he got at Ollivanders as he had been eleven – set the scroll down on the kitchen table, and cast a few charms to detect anything dangerous.

They came back negative, and under the equally curious gaze of his godson, Sirius broke the seal and unrolled the parchment. The strange words of Professor Snape momentarily forgotten, Harry watched his godfather’s face closely. He saw wonder, disbelief, happiness, and anger flicking by rather fast, and wondered what was written in the letter that could cause this mix of emotions in the wizard before him.

Throwing the letter on the table, missing the plate with bacon and sausages only by a hair, Sirius stood and began pacing across the entire available space, muttering angrily under his breath. Deciding to give the agitated man some time to calm down, Harry leant over the table, minding the jugs of milk and pumpkin juice, grabbing the scroll and sitting back to start reading.

Only a few sentences in, the green-eyed teen understood the mix of emotions. The letter had been send by Amelia Bones, the Head of Law Enforcement, informing Mr. Sirius Orion Black that the kiss on sight order had been revoked and a renewed investigation of his case started. That in itself was wonderful news, what followed was bewildering. The letter further informed Mr. Black, that charges of murdering a man named Peter Pettigrew had been dropped as he, as of yesterday, was being held, quite alive, in a Ministry holding cell. And therefore it was impossible that Mr. Black had murdered him.

This news slowly sinking in, Harry realized that the rat had probably played a part in the Wizengamot meeting of the previous day, meaning that Dumbledore could have told them that a new investigation was possible, even likely. Why had he not told? Still unsure of what to think, Harry looked up at his honorary uncle, who was pacing and even angrier-looking. “You don't believe that it just slipped his mind, do you?”

“No,” answered Sirius, sighing and running his hand through his no longer matted hair “It would be foolish to believe this miscommunication was an accident.” Having trouble believing this, Harry started to protest, but Sirius did not let him speak, continuing in a tense and angry tone, “As Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, he could have made sure I got a trial, which I did not get the first time. He even could have started a new investigation, pointing out that a trial had never been held to start with, when you convinced him that I had been innocent all along. He chose not to.” He ran his hand through his hair again and picked up his pacing. “So I have to believe, that he also chose not to tell me about this!” He pointed at the scroll lying on the table next to Harry’s long cold breakfast.
His eyes full of hurt and betrayal, Harry looked up and asked in a small voice, “Why?”

“That is the question, pup. That is the question.”

Theodore was watching his father and their summer guest speaking in the Floo room. He was sitting a little to the side with one of the books his tutor in ancient runes had assigned.

The day had been busy thus far. One of the rooms next to his own had been opened and cleaned. It was to be the room the heir of Lord Slytherin would be staying in, until the Lord had decided on a house, more likely a manor, to stay in, and had completed the warding.

It still felt surreal, that the Dark Lord was staying at Nott House and was going to adopt Harry Potter, the model child of all things Gryffindor. The young wizard was unsure if he should be envious of the opportunities the other boy would get, or pity him for becoming the Dark Lord’s ward. Even if the so young looking wizard with the deep red eyes, had been decent so far, he could not forget the warnings his father had given him, only moments before the Dark Lord had stepped through the door to stay in their home.

The differences between what he had seen in the last week and the stories, that had been told in the common room over the years, all whispered and shared under promise of confidentiality, were startling. And Theodore had decided to err on the side of caution. So he treated the Dark Lord with the respect and caution he would use for a slightly insane madman.

He ceased to pretend to read, as the Dark Lord said, “I will not be long Benjamin. My new son will eat dinner with us later.”

“We will await your return, Marvolo,” answered Theo’s father smiling. With a curt nod the Dark Lord turned to the floo, took a pinch of floo-powder from the tin on the mantle and, with a swirl of another set of borrowed robes, vanished in the green flames to the Ministry.

Theodore watched as his father breathed deeply and turned to him. Coming over, he sat beside him and Theo placed the book on the small table between the chairs.

“I want you to not only be polite to the Potter boy, but friendly. Try to be his guide into our society. After today he will be our Lord’s son and heir, all of your classmates and probably all of Slytherin House will try to become an important part of the boy’s life.” A grave and serious face reinforced the importance of this orders, Theodore did not deceive himself into thinking that they could be anything else. “As they will stay a few days here, I count on your ability to make the most of it. Do you understand, Theodore?”

“Of course, father. I will do my best to become someone Potter will rely on.” Hopefully he would be able to keep his promise.
At Grimmauld Place, Molly was desperately trying to find some clothes that could be considered respectable among those belonging to Harry. The teen sat on the bed in the room he shared with Ron, feeling empty and kind of numb. He watched the frantic witch riffling through the hand-me-downs he had got from the Dursleys, and his school robes. Watched as she sent Ron to fetch some things from the twins, and started to assemble some clothes from her children into an outfit Harry could wear to the appointment at the Ministry. Harry couldn’t care less. All morning he had tried to wrap his mind around the fact that Dumbledore seemed not to care what would become of Sirius, even going so far as to keep information from him. At lunch his own problems had come back to his mind full force. All resident Order members, and quite a few others, had come to get a plate full of Molly’s delicious cooking, discussing possible ways to keep Harry from being adopted. Only Professor Snape had said nothing, watching the proceedings with barely concealed scorn. And he was right, there was no way to keep Harry away from Tom Riddle. And they all knew it. Tiring fast of the useless babbling Harry had retreated into the bleak room he now sat in.

Finally Molly Weasley had collected a set of grey trousers, green t-shirt, black socks – those belonged to Fred – and Harry’s best shoes and placed them next to Harry on the faded and threadbare bedspread. “Get dressed, Harry dear. Arthur is waiting downstairs and will take you to the appointment.” With a pat to his shoulder and a sad, wavering smile, the witch left Harry alone.

Mechanically Harry removed the too big jeans and baggy t-shirt to change into the things Ron’s mother had found for him. He felt alone, empty and defeated. At first he had felt so angry, but now all his anger had vanished, leaving nothing behind. Well, that was not quite right. With each article of clothing he put on, dread began filling him. Nervousness took hold of him as he started to wonder what would happen. What would life be like, living with the monster that had killed his parents? That grown wizards and witches feared, so much even that they did not dare speak his name. What would he look like? Harry imagined an older version of the Tom Riddle he had seen down in the Chamber of Secrets as he had gone off to rescue Ginny, back in his second year. But maybe he would look different. Packing his trunk – only a few things were outside, as the letter had stated he was to bring all his belongings – he finally had nothing more to do to stall.

His friends were waiting in the kitchen, together with all the others, who were sitting helplessly watching him walk to his end. At least it felt that way. Sighing, he grabbed one handle of his trunk and began his trek down to the others.

The atmosphere in the kitchen was dark. They all had either pitying looks or blank looks of despair on their faces, and Harry could not stand to look long at either of them. Mr. Weasley tried to be a little more optimistic, and Hermione chimed right in, “We'll keep searching for a way to get you back Harry. Sirius said he'll let me use the black library and hire a really good solicitor to find a way to adopt you or something. Just give us a little more time and we will find a way.”

Smiling weakly, Harry gave her an awkward hug “Thank you Hermione, I know if there is something to be found to get me out of this you will not rest until you have found it.” She nodded at this and wiped at her slightly damp eyes.

Ron gave him an awkward hug as well. “Don’t let this get you down mate, ‘Mione will find a way.”

The twins patted him on the shoulder, each one on one side, and nodded encouragingly. “We'll write you,” said one of them.

“Keep you up-to-date on our business,” said the other.

“And if need be, just write and we’ll find another flying car.” This weak attempt at humour did not lighten the mood one bit. Sirius was the last to hug Harry, and he clung to him, almost as if he was
the last solid thing in the world preventing him from drowning. With a last few waves at the others, Harry followed Mr. Weasley out the door, his last gaze over his shoulder landing on the spy standing in shadows and staring intently at the two departing figures. Then Mr. Weasley shrunk down Harry’s trunk, which the teen had left in the hall, told Harry to take his arm, and apparated them both to their destination.

They landed on one of the apparation spots in the Great Entry Hall of the Ministry of Magic. Harry needed a moment to catch his breath, and then took a good look around. This was his first visit to this place, and beside his nervousness he still was curious what it looked like. To soon Mr. Weasley touched his arm. “We have to go, Harry. It would be bad if we were late.” And so they set into motion through the crowd of witches and wizards to the elevators. Harry almost immediately felt his nerves again. If this kept up, he most likely would be ill.

The only thing Harry noticed on their way to the offices of the Department of Family Affairs where the paper-plane memos zooming around just over the heads of the people walking around. Arthur, noticing Harry’s interest, explained. “These are memos and letters exchanged between the departments. I was told, that once they had tried to use owls. But this practice was abolished quickly, all the mess owls make…” he trailed off again and Harry had lost interest anyway.

As they reached the floor marked as ‘Department of Family Affairs’, Harry came out of his stupor. He needed his wits about him, or dangerous things could happen. The Potions Professor’s words echoed through his head: *show respect, rein in your temper*. If he managed this, than maybe he would survive until his friends and family found a way to get him free.

Mr. Weasley stopped them in front of the office of Amanda Wisby and turned the smaller wizard to face him “Whatever happens, Harry, you are a part of our family. Don't forget that! And write as often as you can. Do **not** lose hope, Harry. We all want you back with us.”

Not sure what to say Harry only nodded and took several calming breaths before he said, “Let’s get this over with.”

Releasing the teen's shoulders, the red-haired wizard knocked at the door and a cheery “Come in!” answered from inside. With his stomach rapidly falling below his knees, Harry followed Mr. Weasley into the office.

His first impression of the room was one of ordered chaos. There were stacks of files everywhere. Books and papers were stacked in haphazard heaps on several mismatching desks and chairs. The second thing he noticed was a wizard standing at one of the desks bent over it, obviously reading a long parchment filled with tiny writing. The man wore robes of a deep green over his suit of dark grey, and his hair carefully styled and with a little wave to it.

He ripped his gaze away from the man turning his world on its head as a cheery witch in a bright yellow summer dress, without robes, came around another desk, missing more than one of her heaps by a breath, smiling at him. “Mr. Potter wonderful, now all are here! I always love days on which I can reunite families. Come, come don’t be shy.” She ushered him over to the desk by which the other wizard was standing. Harry moved reluctantly away from his escort. How he wished he could wipe that smile from Mrs. Wisby’s face. This was not a happy reunion as she seemed to believe. In his eyes, this was a kidnapping, nothing more, nothing less.

As the teen approached the desk, the man, whom Harry assumed was Voldemort, looked up from the papers. Harry’s speculations had been spot on, he did look like an older version of the Tom Riddle he had met as a memory. Even his eyes were the blue he remembered them as being.

And then the man smiled, kind, open, friendly... and Harry felt something cold run down his spine.
“Harry, how nice it is to finally meet you. I have heard many things about you in these last few days. And I am glad that we will be family from today onwards.” He turned to the still beaming witch “Can we proceed?”

Harry had to suppress a shudder. The man had to be a consummate actor. There was no other way that he could sound so sincere. Avoiding to look at the man about to adopt him, Harry’s gaze fell onto the papers lying on the desk. It was something titled Adoption Documents and what seemed to be his birth certificate. There it stated: Harry James Potter, son of James Charles Potter and Lily Potter née Evans.

“Yes naturally Mr. Riddle, here is the quill.” She handed him a sleek-looking black quill with a very sharp tip. “You only need to sign your full name on this line.” She indicated a dotted line at the bottom of the long parchment of the adoption document.

Harry wondered why there was no ink and stared, shocked that the process of his being handed over to the man that had tried to kill him on more than one occasion would run so fast. He watched, unable to avert his eyes, as the quill was set down on the line and Voldemort started to write Tom Marvolo Riddle in red ink and a flowing cursive. Magic swirled through the room and around the teen and the man adopting him. It sank into both of them, flashing in a blinding white light. As soon as he could see again, Harry saw the name on his birth certificate change. Harry changed to Henry and behind Potter appeared the name Riddle. Now he was Henry James Potter-Riddle, adopted son of Tom Marvolo Riddle. Even though the names of his real parents were still present on the document, the world would never be right again. Harry was sure that he had to look deathly pale, how the Ministry woman could still be so cheerful, he could not comprehend.

“And now the other part,” said Voldemort rather cheerful himself, and Harry flinched in surprise. What was happening now? His eyes widened considerably as the evil wizard started to draw his wand, holding it with both hands in front of his chest at the height of his heart. He was even more surprised when the dark haired man started to speak in parseltongue :I, Tom Marvolo Riddle, son of Merope Gaunt, descendant of Salazar Slytherin, do hereby claim the title of Lord Slytherin. To fill the responsibilities of a Lord to his people, to further the welfare of the wizarding community, to serve magic. As heir, I declare my adopted son Henry James Potter-Riddle. So have I sworn, so mote it be:.

Again magic swirled through the room, this one feeling like more. More power, more responsibility, more obligations, more duties. It tested the man and boy claiming the titles of Lord and Heir Slytherin. Harry flinched as the magic settled like a heavy cloak not only in the man beside him, but in him as well. And with a faint feeling he watched the name on his birth certificate change again. Now it read Henry James Slytherin-Potter. He so wished that this was a bad dream. But it was not to be. “Come, son, we should leave. There is much to discuss.” Harry turned, numbly receiving his shrunken trunk from Mr. Weasley, who looked shaken, nodding and reaffirming the promise to stay in touch, and then followed his new guardian out of the office and back to the elevators.

“We will stay the next few days with Lord Nott and his son at their house. By then I will hopefully have found a house we can live in.” After that they stayed silent on their way to the public floos.

“You will go first, Henry. Have you used the floo before?” Nodding his answer, unable to form words at the moment, Harry received a pinch of floo-powder. “The address is ‘Nott House’.” Throwing down the powder, Harry stepped into the flames and said, “Nott House.” He was swept away into an uncertain future.
During the week I probably will not be able to keep up the posting speed. But we will see.

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Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
On their way through the Ministry, Marvolo thought about the tasks that had to be done next. Highest priority had to be establishing rules with his new son. And probably some kind of truce. The boy was much too pale, he noticed, glancing at him as they stood in the elevator back down to the entrance hall. As if he believed he was walking like a lamb to slaughter. But surely this was not the case... was it? Thinking about it, the new Lord Slytherin had to confess that it was entirely possible for the boy to think he was going to die. A healthy measure of fear Marvolo did approve of, but Henry seemed to be in a kind of stupor, or terrified beyond measure. That would not do. He needed a cooperative heir, one that was able, and willing, to support him. He would have to lure the boy in. A smile graced the handsome face of Lord Slytherin, he always had enjoyed finding out the desires and needs of people that would benefit him. He would enjoy doing it again to gain the Boy-Who-Lived.

Finally they reached the public floos, and Marvolo gave the address to the still pale teen. Following the boy – his adopted son, he thought smugly – Marvolo prepared to start the game.

ooOoo

They arrived in the cheerfully painted Floo room – it was predominantly light greens and blues, reminding Marvolo of an early spring – at Nott House. As he had requested, neither of the Notts was present. The boy, Henry, was standing just a few steps away from the Floo, staring at his feet and breathing too fast and in shallow gasps.

Marvolo drew his wand. “Accio calming draught.” A messy black head snapped up just as the small vial of clear lavender potion came sailing through the air straight into the hand of the wizard summoning it.

“Drink this. You need to be calm enough to actually follow what I will be telling you.” Marvolo extended his hand to the teen, offering the vial. With reluctance clear in his brilliant green eyes, Henry took the vial and uncorked it. Sniffing at it first – Marvolo nodded in approval – he swiftly drank it down. The effect was almost instantaneous, his breathing evening out and a little colour returning to his cheeks.

“Follow me. There is much to do today and only limited time.” Marvolo led the way to the study Benjamin had vacated so that his Lord could use it.

As they reached the room with the dark wood panelling, Marvolo sat down in the leather chair behind the desk. Establishing authority was always a good thing. The adult wizard indicated for the teenager to sit down in the chair opposite him. While the boy complied, Marvolo set a piece of parchment and a self-inking quill in front of him.

“You will not interrupt me. If you have a question, write it down, so you will not forget it, you can ask them after I have finished. Is that clear?” As the boy only nodded, Marvolo added in a stern tone, “I expect verbal answers. And since we are on this topic, you will either address me as ‘sir’
or ‘father’ while in public. You may call me Marvolo when in a private setting. Understood?”

A sullen, “Yes sir,” was his answer.

“Very good.”

Before he could even start to give his careful prepared lecture, the raven-haired teen started to scribble down some notes. Calling for an elf, Marvolo asked for some tea. And after they both had a cup before them, he started.

“First of all, I think you should know my reasons for adopting you, as well as my intentions for your future.” Throwing an anxious glance at the elder wizard, Henry swallowed and tensed. “As the last war reduced the number of magical people a great deal, another war might well reduce us so far that we will vanish. Taking all I want to preserve down with us.” He took a sip from his tea and looked at his son, gauging if he was indeed listening. “With war out of the question, the only way for me to reach my goals is through political means.”

A confused look crossed the boy’s face and he reached for his quill, only to stop as Marvolo continued to talk. “You know I am the last descendant of Salazar Slytherin. To claim the title of Lord Slytherin and use the connected influence, I needed a son. And not just any boy would do. It needed to be one that was a parselmouth. So you see, I do want you well and educated. You do not need to fear death by my hand.”

Marvolo noted with satisfaction, that his son – he could not get enough of calling him that – looked decidedly less pale and prone to panicking.

Opening a drawer to his right, Marvolo took out a golden chain with a pendant in form of a shield. Holding the chain for Henry to take, he instructed in a neutral tone, “You will wear this at all times, never take it off.” Glancing unsure up at his guardian, the teen accepted the chain. “You want to know what this is?”

“Yes, sir,” was the slightly firmer answer.

“It is an emergency portkey, the Minister kindly approved it for us. It is set for two locations: St. Mungo’s and this house. There are two activation phrases that have to be spoken in Parseltongue: ‘Hospital’ if you are in need of medical attention, and ‘home’ to get here. As soon as I have decided where we will live it will, of course, change.” Nodding at Henry, who looked like he wanted to ask a question really badly, he allowed him to ask now.

“Why do I have to wear an emergency portkey? Who besides you ever tried to hurt me?”

Raising his brows in surprise at this lack in common sense, he calmed his initial response so as not to jeopardize his progress with the boy. “For one, you are a celebrity. And those tend to attract the crazy. Such people normally do not need a reason to do something drastic,” he said with a mocking smile. “Then there are those that will object to you being my son. On both sides of the last war, I would guess. And then there are always those, that think they have something to win in harming or kidnapping the son of a Lord.” Henry still did not seem convinced, chewing on his lower lip.

“If you had had something like this,” he indicated the pendant still held in a small hand, “you could have fled to safety from the graveyard the moment you recognized there was danger.”

Confusion was obvious on Henry’s face as he slipped the chain over his head and tucked the pendant under his shirt. “But why did Dumbledore never gave me one, if they are so useful?”

Shaking his head, Marvolo answered truthfully, “I do not know, Henry. This answer you can only
get from Dumbledore himself.” And then he smirked in humour. “Want another parchment to write down your questions for Albus Dumbledore?”

Still unsure of what to think, Henry nodded. “Yes, sir. That would be great.”

Taking the second piece of parchment from Marvolo, Henry proceeded to write down his question for the Headmaster. Shortly afterwards he crossed one question from his first parchment.

“The pendant also has a shield charm on it – it will only hold against one curse, but that should give you enough time to get to safety – as well as a tracking charm. With that I can find you, if you are not able to activate your portkey.” At this proclamation the boy looked rather offended, but with a huff closed his mouth again without saying anything.

Standing up, Marvolo drained his cup, walking over to the window behind the desk. It was a really nice and sunny day outside. Turning back to the teen, who was again scribbling on his parchment, he cleared his throat and started on the next topic on his list.

“You will have privileges and duties. Failing in the latter will result in loss of the first. Also, disobedience and lack of respect will result in the loss of privileges.” Marvolo quickly decided on what tone to use for the next piece of information, stern but benevolent was his choice. “There will be no corporal punishment of any kind. But I reserve the right to get creative with my assignment of essays, tasks, or chores, to get across the point I want to make. Understood?”

Slightly paler again, Henry nodded and, gathering his courage, asked, “Can you give me an example of what to expect, if I … if I would lose my temper in public over something you want me to do?”

At the stern and calculating stare from Marvolo, the teen gulped and trembled. “You expect this to happen?”

Looking at his hands, Henry nodded his messy head. “I have a volatile temper at times.”

Writing down ‘meditation’ on his own list, Marvolo took his time studying his charge.

“I would demand a public apology. You would lose privileges, like the use of your broom or visiting with friends. Also, depending on what it was you refused to do, I would assign an essay or something similar.” Marvolo closely watched his heir while relaying this example. He seemed to relax a little at his new father’s explanation.

“That sounds fair. Sir,” he said quietly, taking his tea to drink the cup dry.

“Take another cup, son. By the way, are you hungry?”

Blushing a little as his stomach answered this question, Henry nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Toppy!” Marvolo called the elf that waited on him in this house. With a soft popp the elf appeared in the room, bowing to both wizards. “Get us some snacks, please. Sandwiches, fruit… scones if you have any.” Bowing again, the little being vanished into thin air without a word.

Returning to his chair, he adjusted his robes and poured himself another cup of tea, adding lemon and three spoonfuls of sugar, to his son's amazement, he glanced at his list checking which topic was next.

“Duties. Writing to and visiting with your godfather is one of them. Visits will have to wait until he is cleared, but you will write him a letter after we are finished here.” Dark amusement filled him as
he took in the open mouth and wide eyes of the boy in front of him. “Close your mouth. A display like this is not becoming for the heir of two houses.” With an audible clack the boy got his face under control again. Almost chuckling over shocking his son this easily, he moved on.

“You will also take lessons over the remainder of the summer. What those will be, we will have to decide in the next few days. I intend to send a request to your teachers to see which classes you could use help in. After all, this is the year you will take your OWLs”

At this moment a tray with snacks appeared between them on the desk. Seeing that his son was having a little trouble coping with all the information, Marvolo started to spread raspberry jam on one of the scones. Moments later the bewildered teen followed his example, taking some apple slices to munch on.

They sat in silence for a moment, enjoying their little meal. As time was short, though, Marvolo did not let the silence continue long. “What do you think your worst classes are?”

Swallowing the last bite of his cheese sandwich, the boy answered without hesitation. “Potions, History and Divination. But I don’t think I want to bother with Divination. It's rubbish.”

Raising a brow to this, Marvolo asked with a drawl, “And why take a class that is ‘rubbish’? You could have chosen something else.”

Blushing, Henry lowered his gaze to the tray. “Ron took this class, so I did the same.”

“I take it that you have no talent as a seer?”

“No, sir.”

“Very well. The Sight cannot be taught. So I have no objections for you to use your time on other, more important and useful subjects. What are your other electives?”

“Only Care of Magical Creatures, sir.”

Thoughtfully stirring his tea, Marvolo weighed the options. And as he already had intended to make his son study another subject, the decision was not hard to make. “You will take up Ancient Runes as one of your classes this summer. Maybe we can get you through the material for third year before the term starts. Then you would be able to drop the ‘rubbish’ and take Ancient Runes with the fourth-years.” He made a note on his parchment, so he would not forget to add this to his letter for his son’s Head of House at Hogwarts.

“Young Theodore has a tutor for Ancient Runes. I see no reason why you should not learn with him.” Now on to a topic he suspected troubles with. All the families were rather protective about the way they educated their heirs. The main points they always valued, family rituals and magic, were different from family to family, so they tended to be protective about them. Asking about them was not something that was done. But he needed to do so now. Steeling himself to not react to a show of the ‘volatile’ temper the boy claimed to have, Marvolo asked, “How far have you come in your lessons as the heir of the Noble House of Potter?”

Instead of anger and resentment – that he would have understood – he only got a blank face, eyes blinking owlishly at him. “My what, sir?”

Blinking in confusion himself, he almost could not prevent it from entering his response. “You have had no lessons in politics, laws, the workings of the Wizengamot and Ministry? Dancing? Penmanship? Manners? Family history? Duelling?”
Receiving a shake of the boy’s head to each question, Marvolo pinched the bridge of his nose. He was getting a headache.

“You are aware that you always were the heir to the Noble House of Potter, to take up the title of Lord Potter on your seventeenth birthday, having a seat on the Wizengamot waiting for you?”

Looking embarrassed and with the beginnings of anger in his green eyes the boy asked incredulously, “I should have learned all this? Why was I never told?” Sighing, Marvolo took up his quill writing ‘everything’ down on his list next to ‘heir lessons’. “I believe that is another question you will have to ask the Headmaster. As far as I know, he made most of the decisions before you were in school. And probably has done so the whole time.”

Nodding grimly, Henry made a note on his second list of questions.

“Seeing as you were kept ignorant in these matters, I guess you are not aware that Dumbledore is filling the position of regent until you are of age?” Getting only an embarrassed shake of his son’s head, Marvolo huffed. Fantastic, now the boy felt guilty over the failings of others. “Do not be angry with yourself over this, son. It would have been the duty of the adults in your life to make sure you got to learn what you need to know.”

Noting down ‘records of voting, Potter regent’ on his steadily growing list, the older wizard sighed again, looking at his son in sympathy. “You have a busy summer to look forward to. We will need to prioritise what you need to learn first and what can wait until later.”

Marvolo took another sip from his tea. He was at a loss as to why nobody had deemed it necessary to educate the boy. Not even in duelling. What could be the reason for keeping him ignorant of almost everything? Even the things all heirs learned, regardless if they were from a dark or light house. No use in trying to solve this riddle now. Best to continue with the things he had planned to talk about.

“There will be social functions over the summer, you are required to attend. And if your schedule permits it, I will take you to at least one session of the Wizengamot.”

Marvolo’s son was now intently listening with a burning anger in his eyes. Maybe this was a way to sway the young wizard to his side: Including him in decisions concerning him, and giving information. Both were simple enough. What kind of fool was Dumbledore, leaving his hero this open?

“Now, privileges: You will be allowed to fly with your broom, when your lessons for the day are finished and the weather permits activities in the sky. Furthermore, you are allowed to write your friends. But I must insist on a minimal standard regarding your letters’ quality. You may also visit with your friends, from time to time. Once you are back at Hogwarts, playing Quidditch and visiting the village on Hogsmeade weekends are privileges too.” On hearing this, Henry crossed out another question on his parchment.

“Before I relay the plans for tomorrow. Are there any questions regarding your duties and privileges?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. I have an appointment at Gringotts after we are finished here. You will write letters. One to your godfather, and to your friends, as many as you wish. I will read them before they are sent.”

Henry opened his mouth to protest but was stopped by an upheld hand. “You will not embarrass the Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin with sloppy writing and error-riddled letters. Once I am
sure your writing meets my standards, I will no longer require to read your letters.”

Under a pointed glare the teenager gave in, grumpily replying, “Yes, sir.”

“Tomorrow morning a healer will be here to check you.”

At this the teen, who had been calm and collected up till now, jumped up from his chair as if he had sat down on a knarl. “Why? I’m fine! I don’t want to see a healer!” A stern gaze and raised brow made the teen falter and his anger dissipate, falling back in his chair, blushing.

“I know, for a fact, that you were subjected to all three Unforgivables. You were living with Muggles, are a growing teenager and Seeker on Gryffindor’s team. Seeing what other duties others have neglected, I will make absolutely certain that you are indeed ‘fine’.”

Seeing that there was no chance to change his guardian’s stance on this, Henry gave in.

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“In the afternoon a tailor will be here, as we both are in need of a proper wardrobe. I hope that I will have finished a part of your schedule by then.”

A last glance at his list and Marvolo was sure he had said all he had planned. So he took another scone. It was still quite some time till dinner, and he was rather hungry. “Those were the most important topics for now. Are there still questions open?”

“Yes, there are, sir.” Looking on his own list, the teen placed one finger of his left hand on the last item that was not crossed out. “Where will we live, sir?”

Marvolo smiled and nodded in approval, a very practical question. “I do not know yet. Most likely one of the Potter properties. As the Slytherin estates and money were lost several generations ago, I will select one of yours for the time being. It is for this purpose I am going to Gringotts later. As your guardian, I now manage all things belonging to the Potters until you come of age.” He could see, clear as day, that the last Potter was unsure if he was happy with this or not. But he said nothing, crossing out the line and moving to the last open item.

“Why have you changed my name?”

Marvolo had wondered if the boy would ask about this, if he even had noticed, he had seemed rather out of sorts in the office of Mrs. Wisby. “As soon as you are Lord Potter, you will not want all business acquaintances to call you Harry. And to keep them calling you Lord Potter would be unwise. Harry just implies familiarity that will mostly not be present. Now you have a name allowing to keep your distance if you wish to keep it. And it is still possible for all your friends to call you Harry.”

Looking none too happy with this explanation the boy nodded and Lord Slytherin stood from the chair “Toppy!”

The elf they had seen earlier appeared in the room and bowed “What can Toppy do for master’s Master?”

“Show my son Henry,” here he waved his hand at the teenager still sitting in one of the leather chairs in front of the desk “to his room and around the house.” He turned to his son. “Remember to write to your godfather. I expect to see the letter at dinner. At the moment, only Lord Nott and his son Theodore are here. Be polite, we are guests in their house.”

Following the elf to his room, Henry left the study, leaving his new adopted father to prepare for his visit with the goblins.
Harry sat in his room – a very nice room – inspecting his new emergency portkey. The shield had a crest on both sides. One was obviously the coat of arms of the Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin. It was divided into four fields. One, in the upper right corner, held a snake, done in an emerald green. The field right below this held the image of a ladle and stirrer crossed over a cauldron. In the upper left field there was a crown, maybe it represented the noble part. And the last field held some kind of flower. Only the serpent was done in colour, the rest was relief on solid gold.

The other side held the crest that most likely belonged to the Noble House of Potter. Harry was angry over the fact that this was the first time he had gotten to see his own family crest. And that because Voldemort, of all people, had given it to him. Given it to him in the form of an object meant to keep him safe. The Potter crest was only divided into two fields. The one on top held the image of a sleeping lion, the one in the bottom held a crown and a vase, or a pot of some kind, on a tiny table.

Slipping the crest back under his shirt, Harry let his head sink onto the table before him. He had written some letters, and though they were short, it had taken him quite long to write them. He had started with the letter to Sirius, as this was the one he had to write, and tried to not write anything that Voldemort could use against him in some way. He was fairly certain that he had failed to achieve this, but he had had to try. Then he had written letters to both Hermione and Ron. In the letter to Hermione he had written about the fact that he probably had to take many lessons on different subjects during the summer. Something she would certainly find interesting. As she was taking Ancient Runes, he asked her if he could borrow some of her notes. He was certain to get an enthusiastic letter in response, Hermione always was one to encourage learning. The letter to Ron held the same information. What else should he write about? That his name had been changed? He really would prefer to tell this to them in person. That he was made to wear a tracking charm at all times? What would he gain by this? Possibly problems with his new guardian – never in a thousand years would he call that monster ‘father’ – and maybe sympathy from his friends. But that would not get him anywhere. So as surreal as it felt, he tried to abide by his Potions Professor’s advice: To keep his opinion to himself, show respect, and rein in his temper. It was harder than he thought it would be. He suspected that the calming draught he had been made to drink had helped in the beginning.

He sighed and went over to his big four-poster bed with a dark blue coverlet and its equally blue bed curtains. Sitting down, he let himself fall back, staring at the canopy. He was so angry. Angry with himself for being so meek. For saying ‘yes, sir’ to almost anything Voldemort had told him. For going with the monster’s suggestion to keep a list with questions. For starting to doubt the Headmaster. Why had the old man never given him a portkey to get to safety in an emergency? Why had he never told him about the things he needed to know? Never told him that his father had been a Lord? He was angry with Dumbledore for putting him in this situation and keeping him in the dark. That the white-bearded wizard had not told Sirius that the real traitor had been handed over to the Ministry, had never tried to get his godfather a trial, made Harry want to throw things against the walls with their soothing sage-green colour.

Anger and confusion... he had a feeling that those two would keep him company in the next days. He was confused by Voldemort’s behaviour. At the moment it seemed that he truly wished for Harry to be his heir. Wished him to be healthy and educated. He just could not wrap his head
around that one. And trying gave him a headache.

As he stood to start pacing over the nice parquet, there was a knock on his door. Cautiously he made his way over there and opened the door to find Theodore Nott standing on the other side. “What do you want?” Harry spat impatient.

“Sorry for disturbing you, heir Slytherin.” Harry got big eyes at that. He could only remember too well how Malfoy and his cronies had taunted and ridiculed him at every turn, and here was Nott, a Slytherin, speaking with respect. But in a way it made sense, at the moment he was set to be Lord Slytherin one day, was he not? “But it is such a nice day, so I thought about playing a round of Quidditch. Do you want to come?”

Standing in his door Harry contemplated the suggestion of the other boy. He was allowed to fly. After he had finished his duties. Were his letters done? In a way, yes, but he was quite certain, that they were not ‘up to standard’. Drops of ink were everywhere. But he just could not get them better. Aiming a thoughtful gaze at the young Nott standing before him, Harry came to a decision.

“I really would like to fly a round or two. But I have to finish some letters first.” He swallowed his pride, he needed to learn this, even if he got away from Voldemort again, he needed to know the things a Lord did, and writing letters without ink stains on them was one of those things. “I assume you learned to write with a quill?”

Mildly confused, and showing it, Theodore nodded to this odd question.

“Can you show me how to avoid sprinkling ink all over the parchment?” Blushing and trying not to show how embarrassed he was by this situation, he continued, “I haven't gotten the hang of writing with a quill yet. And I better learn fast now.”

Sporting a friendly but mostly blank face, Theodore nodded again “Sure, I'll show you. Do you want me to come in, or shall we go over to the schoolroom?”

“A schoolroom?” Harry asked, what would that be? A room to have school in?

“Yes. It has a blackboard and desks. It’s a bit like a miniature classroom. Before Hogwarts I had lessons there, writing, reading… now I have lessons there over the summer. Like Ancient Runes.”

Harry stepped out of his room, closing the door behind him, saying without word that he wanted to go to the schoolroom.

“Why don’t you bring your letters?” Theodore suggested. “You could write them again there, and we won't need to walk back to your room before we go down to the pitch.”

“We'll need to go to my room regardless, getting my broom and leaving the letters there. But you're right. I better write them in the schoolroom. Maybe you could check my spelling as well?”

Theodore raised a brow at this. “You would let me read your letters?”

“He will read them before I'm allowed to send them, anyway. So I haven't written anything I don't want others to read. So yeah, I have no problem with you reading them.”

Swiftly Harry got his letters, and they made their way to the schoolroom on the ground floor of the house.

An hour later Theodore had shown Harry how to prepare a quill before starting to write, since no one had deemed it necessary to show him that the tip needed to be cut, and how to get rid of excess
Severus Snape sat in his bookshelf-lined living room, a glass of red wine in one hand, his eyes trained on a small phial, filled with a kind of silvery vapour, standing on the low table in front of his armchair. He was waiting. Waiting to learn that he would die because the son of Lily Potter had been murdered at long last, he failing in his vow to protect him to the best of his abilities. Or waiting to be called by either of his masters. He would prefer the later option and was unsure for which summons he should hope: Dumbledore's telling him of a plan to get the boy out of the Dark Lord’s hands, discarding his role as spy. Or the Dark Lord's asking for help with the teenager, to brew potions or give the boy lessons.

He sighed and sipped from the excellent wine, a birthday present from Lucius, the man had excellent taste in wine.

While he waited, he pondered what to do with the memory his Lord had given him. The memory of the night he had gone after the child whom a prophecy had foretold would be able to destroy him. The night his best friend had died.

Did he want to see her last moments? What would knowing for sure, witnessing it, do to him? Would it be salvation, knowing she had made the choice, seeing it? Or would it destroy him to see the happenings of this night with his own eyes?

There was no way to know for sure. His mind wandered to the Dark Lord’s explanation as to why he had given him the phial. To let him make the choice if he wanted to see this night, or if he preferred not to watch it. For a moment he asked himself what Dumbledore would have done had he this copy in his hands. There were only two possibilities Severus could think of. Either he would have hidden the memory, never telling Severus that it was in his hands. Or he would have just presented Severus with a Pensieve, saying there was something he had to see. No, Dumbledore would not have given him a choice.

The Potions Master was not able to decide which would have been better. Never knowing that the memory had even existed, maybe being forced to watch it, or to have the choice and the agony of not being able to make it.

As he had no Pensieve of his own, he was unable to watch the memory without borrowing one. And the only two people he knew that were in possession of one were the Headmaster and his Lord. Draining the wineglass he came to a decision. Not a big one, like what he should do with the memory or the ultimatum, but a decision nonetheless.

He stood and went into his bedroom to change into his best everyday robes. He was going to invite himself to dinner at a friend's house. After all he had some information to relay to his Lord, and he needed to check on Harry Potter for his Headmaster. It was always nice to handle the work for both his masters at the same time.
At 12 Grimmauld Place, Molly Weasley was preparing dinner for quite a few people. Different Order members had been dropping in to inquire about the appointment in the afternoon, and if anyone had heard anything new. It was likely that there would be many people in to ask for more news.

Hermione had commandeered one end of the large kitchen table, covering it with books. Sirius had helped her find anything that might be of interest in the Black family library. She first had said she could go alone, she was good at finding the books that might hold information that she could use. Trying to find something to free Buckbeak she had acquired a knack for finding old court files and precedences. After Sirius pointed out that he did not want to come to help her search, but to keep cursed books at bay and ward her against anything nasty they might encounter, she was all to happy for him to come.

And now she was sitting buried in books, taking notes and wishing she had access to the vast library of Hogwarts. So far she had not found anything that could help them free Harry from his fate. All she had found were accounts of cases where the family of Black had taken in orphans and children with Muggle parents that showed signs of the rare metamorphmagus ability. It was widely considered a Black family trait, and all children sporting it were considered family. As this supported the reason You-Know-Who was able to adopt Harry, Hermione was not happy with this. Even if she was fascinated by the idea that the pureblood families once were all too happy to find a ‘lost’ child and bringing him or her back into the family. Briefly she wondered if Malfoy knew about this, the way he always picked on her for her parentage suggested that he did not.

Sighing in frustration, Hermione took a new book from the heap on her right. Why did she only find evidence that the adoption was right by all laws and traditions? It felt so wrong, it was impossible that this was the way it should be.

Sirius came into the kitchen, a dark look on his face. Hermione barely looked up from the books as the owner of the house came over to her and sat in the chair on her left side.

“Found something?”

“No. Nothing useful, at least. Family gifts seemed to have been important in the past. But I was thinking…” she trailed off.

“Yes?” prompted Sirius after a moment of silence from the young witch.

“Didn’t Harry’s parents make any arrangements for him, if something should happen to them? Wasn't there a will?”

Sadly looking down on his hands clasped on the table, Sirius nodded. “Of course they made arrangements. That's why they choose a godfather, me, and a godmother, Alice Longbottom. But as neither one of us could take him after his parents died, he was placed with his closest family: his mother’s sister.” Looking back up at the tired face of one of Harry’s best friends, he added, “And I don't know if they made a will, or if it was found when they did make one. The house was almost destroyed that night.”

Hermione huffed and laid her quill down on the parchment with her notes. “And why can’t you take him in now? Why can You-Know-Who just waltz in like this and adopt him?” She rubbed a hand over her face. “The wizarding world does not make sense most of the time!”

That startled a laugh out of the grey-eyed man. “Oh, Hermione! Even though something doesn't
work the way you expect it to work, it still can make sense.” Seeing that the girl was about to protest, Sirius held up a hand “Let me explain.” Nodding, Hermione sat back, listening with curiosity and a little bit of stubbornness in her eyes.

“Family was always important for those of magic. Families shared similar gifts and learned many things about those. In times when not many could write or read, all the knowledge was passed on through oral tradition. As there was almost no written records, family was defined by the gifts they shared. And even as this changed, when the art of writing was spreading, family was still defined through gifts shared.”

Hermione’s eyes gleamed with the joy of learning something new, she listened with rapt attention. This was something she could most likely not find in a book, only told to the sons and daughters of the old families.

“As you can see, if one is to learn everything that there is to know about a gift, one needs to find the family that has this gift. So the Department of Family Affairs traditionally places children – who come to be in their care – with witches and wizards who share their gift. And there is no doubt that Harry is a parslemouth, a gift associated with the Slytherin family.” He put his elbow on the table and let his head sink into his hand. “And as godparents only get guardianship if no other family is found, I don't think that we have any chance of getting Harry back. At least not until his new guardian,” he spat the word out with hatred, “proves that he is not capable of caring for a child.”

Hermione perked up. “That’s a possibility! I have to research what is considered proof of that. Thank you, Sirius!” She jumped up and sprinted out of the room, almost tripping over Mrs. Weasley on her way to the door.

A little sad, Sirius stood up to follow the enthusiastic witch to the library. It still was not safe in there.

Coming back from Diagon Alley, Marvolo found two of his followers sitting in the parlour of Benjamin’s home discussing the OWLs. As they saw him enter, they both started to rise from their respective armchairs, but Marvolo waved them back down.

“Where are the boys?” he asked, curious, handing his travel cloak to Toppy.

“Theodore and your son are outside. I have seen them flying on the pitch,” Benjamin answered and held up the decanter in a wordless offer of a glass of wine.

Walking over to the other two, Marvolo conjured himself another armchair, a slightly fancier one, and sat down, accepting a glass of wine from Benjamin. “So there was no problem in my absence? Henry did not try to run? Or throw a tantrum?”

“As far as the elves have told me, there was nothing of significance happening. I am rather surprised, but so far he has only interacted with Theo, we still have to meet.” Sipping from his glass, Lord Nott smiled a little, amusement evident in his eyes. “I admit it is not what I had envisioned.” That had both Benjamin and Marvolo chuckling.

“We will see how long this lasts. Was there something you wanted to tell me, Severus?” Marvolo
looked curious as Severus gathered himself before replying. Had he already watched the memory he had given him? Was he on his way to winning the Potions Master back? He really hoped that he was. It would be a waste if he had to kill the man.

“Well, I have not seen the Headmaster since I reported last evening. The other members of the Order have been running in circles since Arthur Weasley left with Mr. Potter. Miss Granger was raiding the Black library to get information, and researching to find a way to get her friend back. At the moment, there are no plans to use force. But I am almost certain that at one point or the other it will be considered.”

As if speaking about them had conjured them, both young wizards came into the room. Theodore was a few steps ahead of Henry, smiling, while the shorter teen was trying for a blank face and failing miserably. It was obvious to all the men that he was nervous and cautious, ready to run at a moment’s notice if necessary. They both had changed their clothes, and Marvolo sighed internally: his son needed a new wardrobe. His garments looked more like rags than proper clothes.

Seeing that the boy held some parchment in his hand, Marvolo held out his own. “Hello, Henry. I see you have finished the letters.”

With a nervous, “Yes sir,” and quick glances to Theodore’s father, Henry took the few steps to the man sitting in the only green velvet armchair, passing over the letters.

Reading them, Marvolo noted the erratic writing, far from the flowing cursive one would expect from the heir of two noble houses, but was pleased that the letters were free of splotches and spelling errors. He also noted that they were all short and held only basic information, nothing of the boy’s feelings or other personal matters. He probably had no reason to wonder why, he had told his son that he intended to read the letters before he was allowed to send them.

“I am pleased,” he praised and caught a brief flicker of surprise followed by suspicion, still a long way to go. “You can send them after dinner.” Standing up, he gave the letters back to his son. And they all made their way over to the dining room.

Unlike all of last week the table was set for five people, rather than four. As they took their usual places, Henry had to sit across from Severus and beside Theodore. They were served a nice pumpkin soup with freshly baked bread as the first course. The adults spoke about different things regarding magical theory until the main course was served.

“How was your visit to Gringotts, Marvolo? What did the goblins have to say?” asked Benjamin, taking a bite from his lamb roast.

“Well, it seems that most of the Potter wealth is still intact. Henry and I will have a few properties to choose from.” He shifted his gaze to his son, who was moving around his food on his plate, he had not eaten much so far. “There are two townhouses, one in London and one in Edinburgh. And a manor near York. There are smaller houses – the cottage in Godric’s Hollow and a small shop with a flat in Hogsmeade, some vacation homes on the Continent – but I think we should take one of those three. In the next few days I will have a look to confirm that they are safe, before taking you, Henry. As I have no preference one way or the other, I think it best that you have the last choice.”

Nodding with his mouth full and looking bewildered, Henry gave the impression that the day had worn him thin. Giving the boy time to eat properly without standing in the centre of attention, Marvolo shifted the talk to members of the Wizengamot, he needed the information, and it wasn't anything he did not want his new son to know.
After they had pudding – vanilla ice cream with fresh strawberries – the boys stood and excused themselves, Henry emulating Theodore, much to Marvolo’s delight, and the adult wizards stayed behind.

Reaching in the pocket of his robes, Marvolo pulled out a letter sealed with the Slytherin coat of arms, offering it to Severus to take. “Can you take this letter to the Head of House of Gryffindor? I hope that she will not burn a letter from me, if you are the one to deliver it.” He smirked in response to Severus’ carefully neutral face.

“There is a faculty meeting tomorrow morning, I will give it to her then. My report on the boy is finished, do you want it now, my Lord, or shall I give it to McGonagall to send with the others?”

Although he was curious and wanted to know more about the boy he had adopted, and it was not likely they would have an amicable conversation any time soon, it would be best not to be too obvious about using his connection with Severus. “Send it with the others.” Severus nodded at this order. “I have another question for you, Severus. Did the old meddler tell you the rest of the prophecy?”

“He did not, my Lord. I do not think he has ever told anyone,” Severus answered deadpan.

Surprised, sitting straighter, Benjamin exclaimed “He surely has to have told the boy, did he not?”

Shaking his head, Marvolo sighed, telling both his followers in a quiet and slightly furious tone, “Considering everything he has held back from the boy, I would say that I would be surprised if he even knows that there was a prophecy to begin with.” And as Benjamin contemplated this information, a little surprised, Severus did look like he had known all along.

Chapter End Notes

I am aware that in many stories the will of Harry’s parents is seen as “law” regarding their decisions. I generally think that a will is no place to make arrangements for a child. Most of the time wills are read days if not weeks after someone died. And a child that has become an orphan needs to be cared for right after the fact. So yeah, it does not work that way in my version of the wizarding world.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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I would like your help in deciding if there should be more tags added to the story, and which ones would help finding this story for all that might be interested.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Slipping into his deep black silk robes – it was a rather hot and humid night – the current Dark Lord prepared for a meeting in the middle of the night. He just had been in Henry’s room, finding the teen curled up in the middle of the bed, buried under the blankets, feigning sleep. There was no way anyone could sleep this wrapped up with the current temperatures.

Smiling to himself, he wondered when the teen would be comfortable enough to start acting up. He was almost looking forward to it, being a moody teenager would at least prove that the boy no longer feared being murdered by his new guardian. Still smiling, he went to the entrance hall.

Trusting that two almost fifteen-year-old boys could stay alone a few hours... well, not completely alone, there were house-elves after all, both Benjamin and Marvolo left for Malfoy Manor.

Lucius came to greet his Lord, falling to his knees the moment Marvolo stepped into the large ballroom set up for the meeting. Marvolo smirked at that. It was rather funny to watch his Death Eaters learning how to switch between roles around him. Soon enough they would know when to treat him like a Lord of the Wizengamot or their Dark Lord and ruler. And in some cases, even as a … friend. An alien concept even for him. But all for his goal. Not everything could be easy.

He held out his hand to the kneeling aristocrat, and Lucius obediently laid his wrist into it. Immediately the smaller version of the Dark Mark became visible. A small snake curled around an equally tiny skull. After Marvolo pressed his finger onto the mark, the blond flinched at the pain caused by the magic rushing through him, to call all of Marvolo’s followers to him.

One by One they appeared before their Lord, all in the dark woollen robes and intricate white masks that were the uniform of the Death Eaters.

Soon they were all present, Thorfinn Rowle rushing in as the last one, clearly terrified of being punished for his tardiness, and with a sweep of his robes, Marvolo moved into the middle of the small dais erected in the middle of the east wall.

“I have called you all tonight to inform you of another successful step in our plans.” There were a few cheers at this declaration, but they quickly stopped under his glare. “As you all will, no doubt, read tomorrow in the Daily Prophet, I have adopted Harry James Potter and subsequently claimed my birthright as Lord Slytherin.” Now they were too stunned to react, and Marvolo did not wait for them to get their heads around this turn of events. He thought he saw some of his simpler followers standing open-mouthed farther back. “All of you that have children attending Hogwarts are to warn your offspring of the change in my son's status. I will not tolerate physical or magical attacks of any kind. And as I do not want to harm children, you will be held accountable!” Shudders ran through the ranks as he hissed out the last. This probably would not be enough to get them all to behave, but it would do for the moment.
Searching over the masked faces, Marvolo’s eyes fell onto the one follower that had been one of his most loyal. Time to reward him. “Bartemius.” The man stepped forward and fell to one knee with all the grace he could muster. “After we are finished here, you will take this portkey,” he held up a small bronze disk, “to a special healer near Moscow. When you return with a new identity you will work as personal assistant for me in my role as Lord Slytherin.” Smiling and sending shivers down the spines of many standing in the first row, he added in a silky voice, “You did well in aiding me. This is as much a reward as an opportunity. Use it well.” Accepting the disk with a reverent, “Yes, my Lord. Thank you, my Lord.” and bowing low, the man retreated to his place.

“Thorfinn.” Calling the still-terrified man to the front – he had punished the last one to enter quite consistently in the past – he asked, “You are part of one of the Obliviators' squads, are you not?”

With a quiver in his voice – which he tried to suppress without success – the blond wizard answered, “Yes, my Lord. I switched to this department a few years ago.”

Nodding, satisfied, Marvolo gave his orders. “You will compile a list of all magical children in the muggle world for whom you, or any other team, was sent to cover up some accidental magic. Also mark their age and whether they live with their parents or in an orphanage or in foster care.” With bewilderment in his eyes, Thorfinn acknowledged his orders and returned to the spot he stood in before.

“I want you all to be on the lookout for a way to identify those children of magic that are not born in our world. As early as possible. Do nothing but bring their names, ages, and circumstances of living. Am I clear?” There was “Yes, my Lord,” to hear from all over the ballroom. “Good.”

He made another round on the dais, swirling his robes, getting a bit of fresh air under them. It really was hot, and he was wishing for a thunderstorm and the refreshment it would bring. He let his gaze roam over the assembled wizards.

“And one last thing. All of you who are not married have a year to find a partner of your choosing to start a family with. If you do not choose within the year, I will help you find a partner.” An evil grin appeared on his face at this thought. “And all those who are married … I think you should reconsider the size of your families.” His gaze briefly rested on Benjamin, who was a widower, and Allonsius Greengrass, whose wife could not have any more children without risking her life. “Some cases require special attention. Those of you I consider such will be called individually in the next week. If you consider yourself a special case, you have two days to inform me of the reasons you do so.” Sweeping with his gaze over them and enjoying their confusion over these unprecedented orders, he lazily waved his hand. “Dismissed!” As they all bowed low and shuffled out of the ballroom, Marvolo contemplated that it was time to go to bed. Tomorrow was packed with tasks he had to undertake himself, so he'd better be rested.

It was a more-than-usually-grouchy Professor Snape who was on his way up from the gates of Hogwarts. He was on his way to the much-too-early staff meeting the Headmaster had called after Harry Potter had been adopted by the man who once had been known as Lord Voldemort. In his pocket he had the letter from Lord Slytherin to the Head of Gryffindor House and his own report on the boy’s performance in Potions. He had tried to be impartial and found it to be a rather appalling endeavour. He found that he had not been fair to his student, never really acknowledging his work for what it really was. Lily’s son was by no means above average at Potions, but that was
more than he would have told anyone had they asked sometime in the last year.

He was the last to arrive, and he gladly took one of the chairs farther back, summoning a cup of strong black coffee to himself.

“You look like death warmed over, Severus. Are you well?” Minerva asked with concern, sitting in a chair next to him.

“I am fine, Minerva, thank you for your concern. I merely got no real sleep last night.” He nodded gratefully in his colleague’s direction and deeply inhaled the delightful aroma of the coffee.

“Severus,” Albus addressed him from across the room, and all the other professors fell silent and turned their attention to the Potions Master “Do you have new information for us, my boy?”

Taking another sip from the hot and strong coffee, Severus was inwardly rolling his eyes. Why did the old man just need to remind everyone that he was older? Lately he had felt more valued when in the presence of the Dark Lord. At that thought, Severus started. Had he just thought he felt more valued by the Dark Lord than by Albus? Hiding his unsettling revelation, he set the cup down on the paper-littered table and nodded at the Headmaster.

“I have indeed.” He turned to his fellow Head of House “Minerva, Lord Slytherin asked me to deliver a letter, to his new ward's Head of House.” He drew the missive from one of the inside pockets of his robe, offering it for Minerva to take. “He wishes to receive a full report on Harry Potter’s performance in his classes.”

Warily casting a few detection spells before taking the letter, Minerva asked, curious and a little bewildered, “Whatever for? Why would he ask for this?”

Now sneering openly, Severus said in a slightly mocking tone, “The boy comes into his OWLs year. Naturally he doesn't want to be embarrassed by a total failure of the boy he took in to be his son.” What were they all thinking? Severus looked at all of them and quickly saw that they fully expected to hear of Harry Potter’s death sometime soon.

He closed his eyes for a moment, what would he give to get the chance to go to bed and sleep a few hours.

“I saw Mr….” he faltered because Potter was no longer the brat’s name, before he settled on continuing to call him Potter in his current company, “Potter yesterday evening. We shared dinner. And he was healthy, if rather tense.” That brought only minimal relief to the other professors, so he added, “And around midnight, the Dark Lord called all of us to him. He informed us of the adoption, and about the fact that any form of magical or physical attack on the boy would be severely punished. He even ordered all parents to warn their offspring to change their behaviour around Mr. Potter.”

He switched his gaze solely to the Headmaster. “I doubt that the boy’s death is anywhere in the Dark Lord's immediate plans.” He only got a short nod as acknowledgement and felt another spurt of hurt at this. He could not prevent himself from comparing this blatant disregard of the dangers he went through to get the information, to the praise he’d got from the Dark Lord in the last few days. And shortly afterwards he called himself all kinds of fool. He should be above the tricks the Dark Lord used on people to lure them to him, and here he was, almost falling for the actions that had been his downfall in his youth.

While the others discussed ways to get the boy back or at least away from the man who had murdered the Potters, Severus sat contemplating once again the order given to all at the meeting
last night. This order was the reason he was so tired this morning. He had been in bed, but not sleeping, when the summons came. And after he was back at home, he could not find rest. Marry in the space of a year, or at least find a witch to marry in this time, or get a bride assigned by the Dark Lord himself. He had difficulties wrapping his head around this. Of course the goal behind this was obvious, or at least one of the goals: more children from his loyal followers meant more people to do his bidding.

But the implications this order had for Severus himself, those he could not comprehend. He'd never had a desire to marry. First he had been working on his mastery – in the middle of a war – then he had been unable to prevent his best friend’s death. And now, several years later, he had taught so many idiot dunderheads that he had no desire for children of his own.

Pinching the back of his nose in frustration, while an argument between Pomona and Septima rose to an almost unbearable volume, the ultimatum came back to the forefront of his mind. He probably did not need to start worrying over finding a bride until after the first of September. If he was still alive by then, there was plenty of time to despair.

If the summer holidays were going to keep being this much stress, he might just die of exhaustion before the first term of the next school year came to an end.

Minerva had opened the letter in the meantime, reading it with a look of utter disbelief. She cleared her throat more than once to get everyone's attention. Severus watched her reactions and facial expressions closely, curious what she would make of a letter from the Dark Lord written in his capacity as a parent of one of her charges.

“This,” she held up the letter, “is a very formal and polite request for a complete account of the performance of Harry Potter in the last school years.” She had a look about her face that suggested she was chewing on a lemon, a quick glance confirmed that most of the others shared the sentiment. “There are no grounds for us to refuse, so I ask all of you that had Mr. Potter in your classes to write a report – a detailed report – as requested by his … guardian.” At this Snape got out the quite lengthy report he had written the evening before. Accepting it with a raised brow, Minerva asked without saying a word how it was that the Potions Professor already had the report finished. All the other professors nodded in agreement, some making a note, so they would not forget to write it up.

“He asked me about the procedure to request this, so I had a head start.” Nodding to this, she shifted in her chair to face Bathsheda Babbling, the professor teaching Ancient Runes, who looked surprised, as Harry Potter didn't take her subject.

“Lord Slytherin, requests the possibility for … Mr. Potter to take an exam in Ancient Runes at the end of the summer holidays to make it possible for him to drop Divination and take up your subject. He proposes the idea of having Mr. Potter take the class with the fourth-years.”

Severus saw the strain it was for Minerva to remain professional on this. To treat a person she saw as a raving madman as a parent. He could sympathise with this, it was really hard wrapping his head around the changes in the Dark Lord’s behaviour.

Nodding thoughtfully, Bathsheda smiled. “Well, it's not like we haven't done something like this before. If he passes the exam, I see no objections. Maybe it will be a challenge to plan the schedules, but manageable, I think.” She smiled again, happy about the prospect of getting another student into her classes.
The Headmaster got Minerva's attention to ask, “Is there a reason given as to why the change in subjects?”

With a small smile the Scottish witch answered, “Apparently Mr. Potter discovered that he has no talent as a seer, and does not wish, and I quote, to ‘waste the instructor's time’.” At that Filius tucked his head and hid a grin behind his hand. The Head of Ravenclaw had no real patience for the art of divination as a subject for everyone to take. You either were a seer or you were not. No need to waste time trying to teach the unteachable.

After this they changed subjects, much to Severus’ relief, to other students, the next class of first-years, and the still not filled post of Defence against the Dark Arts Professor. Albus asked for all of them to think of someone to ask, as there were rumours that the Ministry would try to intervene if they didn't find a new professor soon. The rest was the same as all the other years on the first staff meeting, even if normally it would be held in the first week of August and not in the middle of July.

The staff meeting ended with a reminder from Minerva to Mr. Potter’s teachers to finish the reports as fast as possible, and Severus was glad to have finished this, for now he could get a few hours sleep. He dearly needed it.

oooOOooo

At the same time there were four people sitting around the table in the dining room at Nott House. A rather sleepy Harry looked onto an almost disturbingly domestic scene. Voldemort was reading the main articles of the Daily Prophet, drinking tea, with three huge spoonfuls of sugar, and eating waffles. Across from him sat one of his Slytherin year-mates reading the sports section of the newspaper, while Lord Nott, a Death Eater, was reading the society pages.

Harry almost was convinced that he was still sleeping and dreaming ludicrous things due to exhaustion. He hadn't been able to find sleep last night until the sun had started rising and casting rays of early morning light on the floor of the room he was staying in. That someone had come in in the middle of the night hadn't help matters.

At least he was calmer than yesterday and tried to get a feeling for the moods of the man who had killed his parents. If he wanted to avoid problems and get to his friends in one piece, he had better learn to read the man, the way he had learned to read his uncle, aunt, and cousin. And so he had declined the offer to a part of the shared newspaper and opted for staring at his plate, shooting glances at the adult wizards at the table.

After the first cups of tea were drained, conversation started up between the three Slytherins. Theodore relayed the plans for his day to his father and then participated in a discussion over a Quidditch match that was reported in the Prophet.

 Completely off balance, Harry took to looking at his plate, silently finishing his toast with some cherry jam and a few strawberries.

He almost jumped out of his skin as Theodore's father addressed him. “One of my elves informed me that a snowy owl arrived in the owlery during the night. I assume that it is yours … Henry.”
Harry was not sure, but he thought he'd seen a covert glance to Voldemort from the other wizard, as if he was not sure how to address the teen forced into his company. “If you are finished with breakfast, Theodore can show you the way to the owlery, and you can check on her.”

Harry was not really happy with doing what a Death Eater told him to do, even if it was phrased as a suggestion. But he wanted to see if the owl mentioned really was his Hedwig. He would be happy to have one of his friends here, and an owl he trusted to deliver his letters. So he stood placing the silverware down. “I am finished and would like to check on my owl now.” Struggling with himself and chanting, ‘keep your temper, show respect, keep your temper….’ silently in his head, he turned to address Voldemort and asked, “May I go?”

The teen clenched his fists as the bastard set down his cup, making a shooing gesture at him and said, “Off you go! I will send an elf to inform you when the healer is here.”

Barely managing not to roll his eyes or grind his teeth, Harry followed the other teen out of the room and down a long corridor. Once outside at the back of the house he whispered just loud enough to be heard by the other boy, “Does he think we're five?!?”

Laughing loud at that, Theodore led him alongside a path through a rose garden to a small building resembling a spindly tower with open arches as windows. And then he started to introduce all the owls, while Harry stroked the feathers of his loyal friend Hedwig.

oooOOooo

At Grimmauld Place, Sirius Black held a short letter from his godson in hands. A nondescript owl had brought it this morning. He was glad that Harry had written, yet felt so sad about how impersonal the contents were. But it was to be expected, as the things Harry had written led him to believe that the bastard of a dark wizard most likely was reading everything Harry would send to his friends and family.

But at least letters to him, the boy’s godfather, were considered duties, so it was likely that he would get a letter quite regularly. And visits, once he was cleared. His eyes fell onto the other letter he’d gotten the day before. Once he was free to be seen again, he would make sure to spend as much time as possible with his friend's son. No way would he leave him with the murderous git.

In another room of the same house, Hermione and Ron read Harry’s letters to each other, wondering how it must be to be forced to live with Slytherins. Ron spun tales worthy to be handed in for one of Professor Trelawney’s classes. Hermione tried to be more sensible, but had trouble keeping her imagination from running away with the more likely aspects of Ron’s horrible little stories. They both started to write answering letters on the spot. Hermione’s naturally coming out longer than the one the red-head wrote.

oooOOooo

Marvolo stood in the guest room Healer Greengrass, the younger brother of Lord Greengrass, was setting up to be the room for Henry's exam. He had already sent an elf to fetch the boy and had only to give a few more orders before he came here.
“I want you to explain everything before you proceed. And to answer any and all questions my son may have.”

The healer nodded, setting down a self-recording quill on the parchment that was to become Henry James Slytherin-Potter’s medical record, and answered with a small bow, “Yes, my Lord.”

In this moment there was a knock on the door. After Marvolo’s call to enter, Henry stepped through the door, the elf that brought him here vanishing into thin air behind him. “Come in, Henry. I want to introduce you to Healer Malcolm Greengrass.” He waved a hand in the direction of the young man, just a year older than Severus, wearing sensible dark grey robes. “He is to be your personal healer.”

Bowing to his young patient the healer greeted, “A pleasure to meet you, heir Slytherin-Potter.” He straightened again and smiled in a friendly manner at the young suspicious-looking wizard. “Today I will perform a thorough magical health exam to determine if there is something we need to address or monitor.”

Waiting for Henry to acknowledge this, the healer got his wand, polished to a subtle sheen, out of its holster. After Henry had nodded that he understood, he was ushered to sit down on a wide padded bench.

“I will start the exam by looking at your eyes. Please remove your glasses for the first step. I will use a spell to tell me how well you can see without them. After that we will repeat the spell with your glasses on.” He conjured a floating picture of a unicorn near the opposite wall “I want you to look at the unicorn while I perform the spell. It will probably tingle a bit but that is all you should feel.” Henry took his glasses off, folding them to hold in his left hand, turning his gaze to the prancing unicorn across the room. Marvolo was of the opinion that it was a little childish to use the picture of a unicorn, and by the look on his face, Henry was not impressed either.

As the spell was performed, the quill started to record the findings, and after the second round of the spell, with glasses on, Healer Greengrass turned to the parchment to read the results. “When was the last time your glasses were checked? They do not fit your needs at the moment.” Expectantly waiting for his answer, the healer smiled a professional, kind smile at his young patient. Henry was trying for a blank face and partially succeeding as it was not obvious what emotions exactly were making him look at his feet rather than at the healer he was speaking to.

“I got the glasses when I started school. They haven't been checked since.”

“Well, it's a good thing we did check them now. I'll make you some glasses to wear until your father can take you to get you a new pair. But maybe that will not be necessary at all, because your eyesight is treatable with the Oculus Sanus potion.”

“And why did Madame Pomfrey never offer this, if there's a way to make me see without my glasses?” There was a spark of righteous anger in the raven-haired teen's eyes, as he fixed the healer with his gaze.

Marvolo was happy to see this. The day before, the boy had seemed a little too meek for his taste, and he had feared that he might have broken him. He had admired the fierce spirit the boy had shown the night of the third task.

“That would probably be because the potion is classified as ‘dark’ and placed under several restrictions because of it.” Answering to the confusion on the teen's face, Malcolm continued, “It’s not illegal to use the potion. But it is illegal to distribute the recipe in any way, or teach how to brew it. It's also illegal to sell the potion, or to use it in a public clinic. Basically, it can only be used
if a Potions Master, who is already in possession of the recipe, brews it for free.”

Rapidly blinking a few times, Henry asked, “And why is the potion considered dark?”

“As far as I know, the potion uses the blood of the patient it's intended for. But I never have actually seen the recipe, due to the restrictions, so I'm not really sure.” After a short silent exchange between the healer and his Lord, he turned to the teen once more. “But I am certain that your father can explain in more detail.”

He straightened his robes and went over to a leather doctor's bag sitting on a low table. He took out a simple pair of glasses, with gold wire frames and slightly oval glass, tapping them with his wand and mumbling something under his breath. The glasses shimmered golden for a moment before Malcolm handed them over to Henry. “Try these.”

Placing the new glasses on his nose Henry’s eyes grew round, making it obvious that he had not seen this clearly in a very long time.

While the teen looked excitedly around, testing his new glasses, the healer returned to his bag, taking out several small objects. He came over to the low bench, laid the small stone-like objects down, and made his way back to the low table to get some candles out of the bag.

Eyeing the man warily, Henry ceased to look around the room wildly and sat uneasily in his spot. “What's that all for?” the teen demanded to know.

“These are rune stones.” The healer held them so Henry could examine the symbols engraved into them. “To get a really thorough examination, I can either cast diagnostic spells for the next two hours, or I can perform a diagnostic ritual and be done in under fifteen minutes. And as the ritual is more precise in its results and fairly straight-forward, I prefer this over casting spells one after the other.” Malcolm gave his patient a once-over “As it is you I will examine, you can choose.”

Marvolo watched the exchange silently, standing to the side, observing, but not interfering. He wanted to see how Henry would react, how he would decide.

With in suspicion narrowed eyes, Henry regarded the healer and the rune stones. “Is this illegal as well?”

Shaking his head so that brown wavy hair brushed over the shoulders of the healer, he answered, “No, it’s not illegal. The ritual is no longer taught during healer training, and is frowned upon by St. Mungo’s. But it is neither illegal to perform nor to teach it.” As the teen did not ask more or respond in any way, he continued to explain. “If we go with the ritual, you would need to change from your clothes into a linen shirt I have here. After laying down on the bench, I would place these rune stones on several places along your body, while chanting the necessary words. After that I would place candles around you, lighting them and waiting for the results to be recorded. That's all there is to it.”

Both adult wizards were watching as Henry struggled with the decision. Marvolo was pretty certain that he knew what his son was thinking. On the one hand, he wanted this to be over as soon as possible, so that would favour the ritual. On the other hand, he firmly believed that this ritual was in some way dark, and did not want to be part of it, which would rule in favour of the two hours of cast spells.

Finally Henry came to a decision, steeled his resolve and pointedly ignored Marvolo, who had sat down in a chair by a desk in one corner of the room. “I do not want the ritual.”
With a suffering sigh the healer packed the candles and stones back into the bag. “As you wish, heir Slytherin-Potter. Please lay back.” He got out his wand and stepped up to the bench. “I will tell you what each spell is for, before I start casting it. Prepare to remain mostly still for the next two hours.” And with this he started to explain spells and then cast them, the recording quill happily scratching away. Marvolo sat back in his chair summoning a book to him – gaining a dirty look from his son – to pass the time he would be waiting.

After a little more than two hours of casting diagnostic spells, from checking every single organ in Henry’s body to checking his bones, growth, and many small things, Malcolm took the long parchment and started reading. Finally, another twenty minutes later, he stood before his Lord and his Lord’s heir recounting the findings.

“As was expected, there is evidence that your heir, my Lord, was subjected to all three Unforgivable curses. It is fortunate that none of them seem to have left lasting damage. There is only the scar and some lingering magic left from the killing curse.” The young healer started with the findings to be attributed to the most dangerous magic, glancing nervously at Marvolo as he came across the effects of the killing curse. He paled a little as the saw the look on his Lord’s face, it was not that of a man happy with the news he got. Quickly changing the topic to more mundane findings, Malcolm continued. “There is damage to several of his internal organs, due to too little and not the right kind of nourishment for long parts of his childhood. They will not cause problems any time soon, but will start to act up some decades from now,” the younger Greengrass told his Lord, then switched his attention to the teen. “This malnourishment also caused you to be shorter than you should have been by now. Both issues can be addressed by a regimen of nutrient potions, which are not illegal.” He added the last with a smirk for Henry’s benefit. “There were also some bones broken and not healed correctly. Most of them will only start to cause problems in a few years’ time. The only exception being a break of the right wrist. I assume that the wrist is causing trouble while writing, at the moment.” As it was clearly more a question than a statement, Henry nodded reluctantly, confirming that he had trouble while writing too long.

Contemplating this information, Marvolo realised that the trouble with the boy's hand probably was at least partly to blame for his abysmal penmanship.

“How did you break your hand, Henry?” he asked, pushing concern into his voice. He really wanted to know, and wondered when this had happened and why the school medi-witch had done nothing about it. But seeing what all had not been done, and the findings Malcolm had listed, he had an idea.

Henry was broadcasting unease and reluctance, paired with obvious doubt over the validity of Marvolo’s concern. After a moment he answered anyway. “In the holidays after my second year. I was working in the garden and my cousin fell on my hand. It didn't hurt too much, and after a few days it didn't hurt at all.”

And just there his son had lied. Not by much – Marvolo was sure the mentioned cousin had played a role in breaking the wrist – but enough to deflect more questions and attention from the matter. It was a grim picture that was painted here. Keeping information about his standing in the world from the boy, not enough food for large parts of his childhood, badly healed broken bones, an aversion to seeing a healer in the first place. Yes, this was painting a grim picture indeed of the life Henry had had until now.

“I assume Skele-Gro will not be enough to mend those bones?” he finally asked.

“You are correct, my Lord. We could either vanish and regrow the bones. Something that happened
before for all the bones in Henry’s right arm.” He lifted a brow questioningly in Henry’s direction, who mumbled, “That idiot Lockhart vanished them all after an accident during a Quidditch match during my second year.”

“Or we would have to re-break them. Neither option is pleasant, but I recommend them anyway. It is better to mend the bones properly, than to deal with the problems that they will cause later if left untreated.”

Seeing his heir going pale at this declaration, probably remembering the last time he had to re-grow all bones of one arm – what incompetence! – he quickly inserted, “Well, we should probably wait a while to do so. When we start with the nutrient potions – as soon as possible – the improvement in your health should help in mending your bones. Furthermore, we will postpone lessons in penmanship until after your wrist is healed. But that is no reason not to at least try to avoid spelling errors and ink blotches on your letters.”

Gaining a bit more colour, glaring daggers at the floor, Henry nodded, quietly adding a, “Yes, sir.”

“All his other injuries are mostly minor stuff. A few scars from burns and cuts. But he did not receive the potions used to immunize children against some common maladies. Which should be resolved rather easily.” Healer Malcolm concluded his findings extending a scroll to his Lord. “A list with all required potions.”

Taking the small scroll from the healer, Marvolo rearranged his plans for the day. “I want you to pick one of your summer assignments, Henry. Have a rough draft of what you want to write ready by dinner. You should also think about if you want to see without glasses again. If you have questions about the potion, you can ask them later today. Either way, we will go to Diagon tomorrow.”

Marvolo walked over to his son, looking him in the eyes, and was met with defiance. But there was confusion as well. With enough time, he would get the teenager on his side. “You may go now. We will see each other again at dinner.”

Swallowing and visibly forcing himself to remain respectful, Henry stood straight, nodding to the Healer and then his father. “Have a good day. Sir.” After this he turned and left the room.

With a start, Severus shot out of his bed. His arm was so hot it hurt. It took him a moment to register that he was being summoned. Fumbling to get dressed, he began to work on waking up fully. It would not do to be half-asleep before the Dark Lord.

Only two minutes later, Severus walked up the hall to the study his Lord was in. As soon as he opened the door in answer to the harsh “Come in!” he stepped through and fell to the floor. It had been a long time since he’d seen his Lord this angry, pacing the floor, muttering to himself, Nagini waving her head nervously from side to side. Suppressing a shudder, Severus stayed kneeling on the floor, his head bent to touch the carpet, waiting to be punished for his tardiness. How long had his Lord been calling before he had wakened and made his way here?

As no curse came his way and he instead heard the measured breathing he associated with calming exercises, he dared to rise a little so he could chance a glance at his Lord. Said man was standing
facing away from his Potions Master, looking out of the one window, fists clenched as his sides, breathing in a pattern designed to calm himself down.

Severus almost jumped up and drew his wand, as with a shout of, “He is doing it again!” the Dark Lord violently knocked a porcelain ornament, depicting a rearing pegasus, to the floor, where it shattered into a thousand pieces.

Having found an outlet for his rage, the Dark Lord became calmer, and finally addressed his trembling follower without turning to face him. “Rise, Severus.”

As the dark-haired man did so, he saw a scroll of parchment bound with a green ribbon floating through the air to stop before him. “I need you to brew these potions for me.” Severus heard the suppressed anger in his Lord’s voice and wondered what had happened to anger him so. Plucking the scroll from the air and untying it, he was prepared to find poison and some of the darker potions intended to do harm on the list. He was very surprised, to the point of actually making a sound, to find long-lasting and slow-acting healing potions, as well as nutrient potions, on the list. As he came to the end, he saw the Oculus Sanus potion and finally realized why his Lord was as angry as he was and for whom these potions were intended.

He felt the blood drain from his face, his breathing becoming shallow, as cold fury and utter despair battled for dominance. Lily’s son, the boy he was sworn to protect, had been abused in the house he was living in. All the while the man he had trusted had persisted in claiming that the boy was safe and well cared for.

Severus barely registered that a chair was levitated to stand behind him, and he himself was made to sit down in the chair. As he finally managed to get his feelings back under control and behind his shields, he became aware of his Lord's watching him with calculating and curious eyes.

“It seems that I miscalculated. I thought I’d lost you to Dumbledore. But it seems I lost you to the boy I have now adopted as my son.”

“My Lord.” Severus was still shaking from the revelation just made to him, and had trouble processing that he had just blown his cover, pretending never to have left the Dark Lord’s service. Before he could come up with a way to react, a decision if he should flee or fight, or try to lie his way out of the trap he had just landed himself in, the Dark Lord patted him on the shoulder. “Loyal to my son? I can work with this.”

Taking a shuddering breath Severus flattened the crumbled list and without looking at his Lord tried to explain his reasons. “To keep me out of Azkaban, and to find some way to ease my guilt, Dumbledore made me swear an oath to do all that I could to protect Lily’s son.” He traced the lines on the list with his finger. “How bad was it?” He spoke so softly that the Dark Lord only understood what he asked because he was standing directly in front of the Potions Master.

“I do not yet know. Extensive damage due to malnutrition, some badly healed bone breaks. At the least, it was neglect and bullying. But I think it was more.” The Dark Lord rubbed his hand over his face and through his hair. “Brew these potions. And after that you can prove your claim and be a part of your family again.”

Standing with the list still in his hand, Severus bowed and prepared to leave, reaching the door as he heard his Lord speaking to himself. “Repeating his errors a third time. And I thought he had finally learned…”

With much to think about and a decision finally made, Severus left for Malfoy Manor. The potions lab there was up to his standards, and he needed a friend to speak with.
Marvolo came out of the Hall of Records, his pockets filled with the shrunken files on all the votes the Regent of Potter had made, as Madam Amelia Bones came down the hall from the elevators right up to him.

Putting his most charming smile on his face, even if he did not feel like smiling after what he'd learned this morning, he greeted her. “Madame Bones! What a pleasure meeting again. How can I help you?”

“Nice to meet you too, Lord Slytherin.” She tried to keep her face blank and polite, but her eyes did betray her distaste. “I wanted to ask you if you would be willing to be a witness in a trial for Sirius Black. Even if you are no longer who you were,” Marvolo had to control a laugh at that, she clearly did not approve of the fact he had been exonerated of all his past crimes, “I am certain that you hold enough memories of that time to help clear the matter.”

This was something he admired about Amelia Bones, always sticking to her principles, despite the circumstances. And as she was working within the confines of the laws, he was reasonably sure to be able to predict her moves and make use of them. And as she was aware of the fact that she would be played, he could admire her despite her self-imposed constraints.

“Yes, I am willing to contribute in the endeavour to get justice to be heard. Just owl me the date and time, and I will be there.”

She snorted. “I am sure you will be, Lord Slytherin.” Shaking her head, she left him standing in the middle of the corridor.

Marvolo smiled a genuine smile. Life was so much better now that he was sane again. It was fun, and maybe he would be able to actually make an impact in regard to the problems he saw.

On his way back to the entrance hall, where he planned to apparate back to Nott House and the appointment his son and he had with the tailor, he came across a witch in ugly pink and rose robes. His brows rose at the overt... *pinkness*... of her appearance. Benjamin had told him about the undersecretary to the Minister, Dolores Umbridge, but his imagination obviously was not vivid enough to conjure an image even close to the reality. And this person was such a force to be reckoned with? He almost could not believe it. Well, in a week there would be a session of the Wizengamot, the first one he would be attending in his function as Lord Slytherin. And in this he would meet her for real for the first time. He was sure it would be fun.

Later in the evening Harry was sitting on his bed in the guest room he was staying in. He was wearing nice new clothes. A shirt of silk, trousers of fine wool, and robes of linen. All in colours he had picked himself.

It had been a surreal moment this afternoon. He had seen Voldemort only in his undergarments and socks, being measured to be fitted for robes, shirts, and trousers.
They both got a full wardrobe of clothes sewn from silk, the finest wool, and linen. Mostly clothes fit for summer, as Voldemort pointed out there was plenty of time to get warmer clothing, and ‘Henry’ was due a growth spurt.

How he hated it when the murderer of his parents called him by that name! He managed to keep his temper, if more than once only barely. He prayed that he would be rescued soon, else it be too late.

He tried to hate the clothes too, as he hated the man that paid the tailor to make them for him, along with the Quidditch uniform, the new robes with the Potter coat-of-arms, the new shiny leather shoes. And he maybe could have, if not for the fact that there were also muggle jeans and t-shirts and trainers. He never would have thought that Voldemort, of all people, would get him clothes he actually would want to wear.

He was not allowed to wear muggle clothing to dinner, or when out in the wizarding world, but he had them.

No, who was he kidding? He hated to be in this position. Treated nicely by his mortal enemy. Left in the dark and ignorant by the man who should be his ally.

He had, for the first time in his life, a full wardrobe of nice clothes that were not his school robes. There had been a healer to see him, and no one had mocked him about the things the man had found. Harry was pretty sure that Voldemort had actually understood what his health problems were about, and he had expected to be mocked mercilessly. But that had not happened.

Starring at the heap of folders, all about the way Dumbledore had voted for his seat – Harry’s seat – on the Wizengamot, and the laws that had been voted on, Harry tried to comprehend his feelings. Voldemort had got them for him, so he could see for himself if he wanted the Headmaster to stay the Potter Regent. And so he could learn what he needed to know. There were two more books lying on the desk next to the enormous stack of parchment. One on meditation – a muggle book on meditation no less – and one about the structure of the Ministry and the Wizengamot, and how they were supposed to work together to protect and govern the magical part of Britain.

He had now been with Voldemort a little over one day. He had learned in this time so many things about himself and his position, the duties he should have known about since he could walk. And in all the years he had been at Hogwarts and in contact with the Weasleys and Dumbledore, no one had told him about these things, not even in passing.

It was obvious that Voldemort had ulterior motives to give Harry knowledge, clothes, and lessons, that he checked on his health, was interested in his school-work. If he disregarded the fact that the man had killed his parents and was a monster, he could be classified a decent parent.

Harry buried his face in his pillow and laughed a desperate laugh, tears starting to fall. The Dursleys had messed with him. They must have. How else was it possible that he even remotely could think the Dark Lord Voldemort could be a decent parent?

He felt totally lost, cut loose from everything he thought he knew, caught in a void between what he thought was right and the things he knew to be wrong. It seemed that there was a lot of grey in the world, and not really much white and black.

It would be hard to stay away from the net Voldemort had so skilfully set up for Harry to be caught in. But he had to try. He had to learn what he could, now that he knew about the fact that he would
be Lord Potter one day. And here he was, presented with the opportunity to learn. He would take it and learn what he wanted to know. Hoping that Sirius would be able to get him free and take him in.

Harry wanted to be free. To choose his own path. To know and to learn. He was not sure what it would take to get what he wanted. But he was pretty sure that neither Dumbledore nor Voldemort would want him to be free. The only hope that remained was that Sirius would help him on his path to independence.

That night Harry cried himself to sleep, full of frustration over his predicament, full of anger and despair.

Chapter End Notes

I am not sure where this last part came from. Actually, I did not want to write this so soon, but Harry would not let me write something different. Well, it is his story in a way, so he gets to decide what will happen.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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The next morning Harry woke with new determination. He was going to seize the opportunity and learn as much as he could as long as he had to stay in the enemy’s camp. With this thought he made his way to his own bathroom to freshen up before getting dressed.

As he came out again, half an hour later, he found a stack of letters on top of his desk. Curious, he walked over, only clad in a towel wrapped around his middle.

The letters were from almost everyone he knew. Hermione’s letter was the thickest, there were letters from Ron, the twins, Ginny, Sirius, Remus, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley... but none from the Headmaster. Happy that his friends had written, at not being forgotten, Harry turned to get dressed first.

He opened the door to the walk-in wardrobe – a concept that boggled his mind – and looked at the selection of robes, shirts, and trousers he now had to choose from. Wandering between the shelves, Harry let his fingers trail over the soft fabric. Finally he settled for simple dark grey, almost black trousers, black socks, an off-white shirt, and a pair of comfortable black leather shoes. He would go to Diagon Alley today and – he cringed inside at admitting this – as the heir for the Noble House of Potter, he needed to project a certain image. As he came to stand by the robes lined up on their hangers, he briefly brushed his fingers over the fine silk of his two formal robes.

One was done in different shades of green, a middle green base with embellishments and embroidery done in lighter and darker shades along the hems and seams. Only the coat of arms of the Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin was done in fine silver thread. Right next to it was an equally posh robe done in a deep, dark, brownish-red with embroidery reminiscent of flames. Here the coat of arms was done in gold. The tailor was still struggling with coming up with a way to combine the family colours of both the families he was heir to, without it looking like some Christmas decoration.

Voldemort had explained yesterday that Harry would wear one of the three robes, depending on the occasion and which role he had to play.

It was all a little much to take in, but Harry loved having a robe to wear to represent the Potter family. Taking a step further down to the more everyday robes, Harry picked one with wide arms, which only had buttons over his chest, but was open otherwise, in a deep, vibrant, Caribbean blue. The tailor had literally spent hours holding swatches of different coloured fabric to Harry’s face to find those that suited him the most.

Stepping out of the wardrobe room, now fully dressed and with the gold wire-frame glasses on his nose, he went to the desk, sat down, and opened the first letter from the top, breaking the seal.

Hermione told him about her research in the library to find some way to get him back again. She rambled on about magical family gifts and how fascinating it all was. Harry could tell she had written the letter in a rush. Normally they were more structured than the letter he currently held in his hands. That he would have lessons on different topics was fine by her book, and she encouraged him to keep his eyes open and learn.

Ron’s letter, the next on the stack, was much shorter. He promised some kind of rescue mission,
like the one they had launched in the summer after first year, and lost track trying to come up with a substitute for the flying car. He told him to use the chance to try to spy on the enemy, maybe even sabotage the enemy’s plans.

The letter from the twins was written in two different hands. They had taken turns writing it, bringing a smile to Harry’s face. They told him about the plans for their joke business, that they had started looking for a shop and were developing quite a bit during the holidays, whenever they managed to slip their mother’s attention. They even asked if Harry thought he could use his “in” with the Slytherins to open a new market to them for their products. They closed on a promise to find a way to get him back and a sentence stating that they would refrain from relaying their mother’s orders to keep his head down and out of trouble.

Sirius promised to keep in contact and to do all he could think of to get Harry home. Well, short of illegal things, as he was certain Harry would kick his ass if he got himself sent back to Azkaban.

Ginny’s letter was too sentimental to read, and the ink was smudged in places where it looked as if some drops had fallen onto the parchment. A little uncomfortable with this sign that Ron’s younger sister still had a crush on him, he laid this letter quickly aside.

Remus had not written much and mostly advised him not to lose his head.

The letter from Ron’s parents basically was a warning not to do anything stupid, like running away, and to gather information, sending it in a letter, so they could find a way to reverse the adoption.

Harry frowned, there were quite a lot of hints that he should gather information and relay it to the Order. Shrugging and dismissing it as coincidence, Harry got up and left his room to go to breakfast.

In the hall he met Theodore, who left his room at the same moment. As the other boy turned around and saw Harry, he smiled politely, gave a tiny bow from the waist, and greeted, “Good morning, Heir Slytherin-Potter.”

Harry groaned and gave Theodore a withering look. “Is that really necessary?” They started walking side by side.

“Yes, it is. You are the heir to two Noble Houses, and one of them is an Ancient and Noble House to boot. And I’m only the heir to House Nott, nothing with noble. So there are rules we both have to follow.”

“Wonderful!” Harry said with feeling and sarcasm. “And there’s nothing we can do to change that? Wait!” Harry whirled to face the other teen. “I’ve always been Heir of the Noble House of Potter. No one ever addressed me as heir at school.”

Stopping himself, Theodore turned to face Harry. “Yes, the rules at school are different. It is not as strict. But at the moment, you’re a guest here at Nott House, and so all the rules apply.”

With an exasperated huff Harry started to walk again. “And there’s nothing we can do about it? I’ll go mad if this continues for the rest of summer.”

Laughing, Theodore fell into step with him. “Well, you could allow me to call you by your given name. There’s no other way. And on occasion the formal address still would be the one to use.”

They turned a corner and started to descend the stairs. “Oh, what a lovely hell.” Harry weighed his options. He really did not want to be called Heir Slytherin-Potter the entire time he would be staying here. Did he want a Slytherin, one of the people that had taunted and bullied him in the
past, to call him Harry? With disgust he realized that the name change he had not asked for now
could come in handy. He could allow Theodore to call him Henry, or live with being called Heir
Slytherin-Potter all of the time. Remembering the nice afternoon they'd had together flying on their
brooms and playing chaser against each other, he took a good look at the Slytherin in front of him.
Sighing, Harry rubbed his hand over his forehead. He composed himself and offered in a polite
tone, “I would be glad if you would call me Henry.”

Extending his hand, Theodore answered, “And you should call me Theodore.” They shook hands
and made their way down the hall and to the dining room.

Harry’s life had taken on a surreal feeling, he wondered if it ever would feel normal again.

Sitting down at the breakfast table, after greeting the adult wizards already deep in the newspaper,
Harry accepted a section of the Prophet, as reading seemed better than staring at the others while
they were reading.

He got the part with the advertisements and notices. He skimmed over them, at times pausing to
have a closer look at one. There were witches offering to swap editions of Witch Weekly, offers of
crup pups or kneazle kittens, one mother of a five-year-old boy was searching for others that would
be willing to join in a sort of neighbourhood school to teach the children reading, writing, and
maths. Harry had always wondered how the students from wizarding families learned the basics.
Now he knew of two ways, hiring teachers if you were rich, or doing everything alone if there was
no money to waste. But home-schooling was seemingly the way to go.

Taking a bite out of his toast with scrambled eggs, he read some of the job offers. The Knight Bus
was searching for a second driver to cover half of the shifts, and it seemed that Professor
Dumbledore was still on the search for a new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor.

Harry almost choked on his tea as he came across a job offer posted by Lord Slytherin. It read:

_Tutor for History of Magic needed. OWL preparation. One student, several hours per week,
possibly continuing after term start. Beginning at earliest possible time. Teaching experience and
NEWT in history required. Pay negotiable._

Dumbfounded, Harry dropped the paper to the table and set the cup down. The others were also
looking up from their reading. Blushing, Harry realized that they had heard his reaction to the job
offer.

“What is the matter, Henry?” Voldemort asked “Are you all right?”

Taking a deep breath and coughing some more, Harry shook his head. “I’m fine. Just surprised.
You placed a job offer in the Daily Prophet, sir? Why only for History? Did you already get an
answer about my grades?” He felt off balance. Did he really only need tutoring for history? That
didn't feel right. And it certainly was not enough time to get a report in his grades from Hogwarts,
was it?

Raising one brow and folding the newspaper, Voldemort turned slightly in his chair to face Harry
more directly. “No, I have not yet received an answer. But you said that History and Potions are
your worst subjects. So it seems prudent to get you tutoring in these, regardless of what your actual
grades are.”
Still looking confused, Harry debated if he should ask, and decided that yes he would. Voldemort seemed to be determined to get him educated, so questions regarding said education should be at least remotely safe. “Then why only search for a tutor to teach me History?” But even before Voldemort could answer this, realisation dawned on Harry and a look of horror replaced the confusion.

“As you realized, I have a tutor for Potions already at hand. And,” he said in response to Harry getting paler by the second, “it would do you well to have a cordial working relationship with your Potions Professor once you are back at Hogwarts.” An evil smirk appeared on Voldemort’s handsome face, sending cold shivers down Harry’s spine. “I think that Severus will be sufficiently motivated to do better in teaching you than he did before.” Taking his napkin to dab at his mouth, Voldemort studied Harry and finally added, “And if it does not work out, after a decent try to make it work, mind you, I will find you another tutor.”

Contemplating this, Harry came to the conclusion that this maybe was not the worst possible outcome. Snape could be a link to Dumbledore and the Order. Even if they could not stand to be near each other, the Potions Professor had saved Harry’s life in the past, and his advice, before Harry had been brought to the Ministry to be handed over to the man who had tried to kill him, had proved valuable. He shuddered at the thought of how exactly Voldemort would make sure Snape was motivated. He probably ought to make a real effort to spare the most hated professor of Hogwarts the torture if they failed to work together.

Deciding not to chance pushing too far too soon, Harry just nodded said “Yes, sir,” and resumed his breakfast.

It had been a whole day since Harry had left Grimmauld Place with Mr. Weasley, and spirits among those in the house were accordingly downtrodden.

Eating their breakfast, the Weasleys, Hermione, Sirius, and Remus did not speak much. Dishes were passed back and forth between the people sitting at the table, the room filled with the scent of freshly baked bread, coffee, and fried sausages and bacon.

The twins were bent over the Daily Prophet searching for advertisements of shops to rent. They wanted to get a feel for how much money they needed to put aside for the rent of rooms to set their shop up in. And then Fred spotted a job offer that got his attention. Pointing it out to his brother they both read it carefully once more before addressing their former Defence Professor across the room.

“Professor Lupin, sir!”

“Still looking for a job?”

“We might have found the opportunity for you!”

Smiling despite the gloomy mood, the werewolf answered, “I am not a professor anymore, so please call me Remus. And you both know that I am searching for a job. I don’t think that someone will hire a werewolf, though.”

“We think that that...” “...Will probably not be an issue with this...” “Job offer.”
Fred charmed the page with the job offer to fly as a bird over to the confused and curious-looking Remus Lupin. Fishing the paper bird from the air, Remus started to read, while Molly Weasley glowered at her sons. She did not approve of their chosen career path and made this clear whenever she could find a chance to bring it up, even making some up if none presented themselves.

Sirius was eyeing his friend and the twins, who looked really excited about the advertisement they had found, trying to understand what was so special about it. Losing his rather short patience, he got up from his chair and went around the table to read over his friend’s shoulder. And after he read it once, he started again at the beginning. “That is an opportunity,” stated Sirius. It took several more minutes until the last of the marauders had wrapped their minds around this and started to plan.

In the end, Remus and Sirius decided that Remus would apply to be the History tutor for Harry. As they were pretty sure that You-Know-Who was not the one hiring a tutor for himself. Even if Fred, or George, reminded them that he actually had to take his OWLs and NEWTs again, startling a laugh out of everyone.

Molly was not happy with Sirius’ making a decision without consulting the Headmaster first, but she had no means to hinder the men, and so Remus sat down, writing an application for the job of History tutor.

oooOOooo

Marvolo was sitting in his chair in the study at Nott House. Severus was standing opposite him, projecting calm. But Marvolo was sure that this was only a thin layer over a maelstrom of conflicting emotions and fear.

At the moment, he was waiting for his son to come down. He had sent Henry to his room to try to tame his hair some. He barely was able to contain a smirk as he saw the boy rolling his eyes at this order. But the boy was probably right, taming that mop of hair could prove to be impossible.

Between the Potions Master and his Lord stood a case with dozens of small vials filled with the various potions Henry would have to take to recover from the damage done to him by those generously called his family. Severus had likely been up all night to get them brewed to be ready to be taken for breakfast today.

“I have asked you to stay, to discuss two points with you.” With that Marvolo got the other wizard’s full attention. “First, I want you to tutor my son in Potions. I am certain that he will be motivated to study hard, and you should be able to leave old animosity in the past.” He added with a smirk, “Now that you no longer have to pretend to hate the boy. And for the Headmaster, you can pretend to pretend to be nice for a change.” He had thought about calling his new son “Lily’s son” but decided against it. That would have been a cruel blow, and he was trying to get Severus firmly back on his side, so no low blows for a while. He saw Severus swallowing. “And be sure to start with the basics. It seems that the old meddler made sure that Henry was totally unprepared.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Getting the small vial with potion he had prepared himself from a heavily warded drawer of the desk, Marvolo fixed his most effective spy with a speculative gaze. “We need to find a time for this. When can you be missing for a day without Dumbledore getting suspicious?”
The Potions Master eyed the vial with a little fear in his eyes, and then switched his gaze back to Marvolo. “He will not suspect anything, even if I should vanish for more than a day. He knows that you having a task for me is going to happen more often now. I made it clear that I will not always be able to inform him of my absence.”

Marvolo noted the artificial calm but did not comment on it. “Come over after dinner tonight, you can stay the day and sleep off the effects. After that, I have several more … challenging research tasks for you.”

At that moment there was a knock on the door, and Henry stepped through the door after Marvolo had opened it with a wave of his hand, at the same time depositing the vial back in its warded hiding place. It was thrilling to be able to wield his magic so easily again.

The boy’s gaze fell onto his Potions Professor at once, and he stiffened as he walked in to stand before both men. “I’m ready, sir.”

Assessing this statement, Marvolo looked his son over and noted that he was neatly dressed but his hair still resembled a bird’s nest. “Did you try growing your hair out?” The boy shook his head. Marvolo raised a brow and gave the teen a pointed look, waiting for him to catch up. Finally the boy realized what the problem was and added a “No, sir.”

“Maybe you should try. Longer hair might be more manageable. Think about it.”

Leaving the topic of the Potter family curse – unmanageable hair – behind, Marvolo addressed both other wizards with a small speech he had prepared. “Starting after we have settled into our own home, you both will start working on getting along. You,” he turned to his adopted son, “will do your best to be respectful and learn from your tutor. And you,” he turned to the Potions Professor, “will start to teach my son to the best of your ability and with patience. Is that clear?”

A sullen “Yes, sir,” and a respectful “Yes, my Lord,” were his answers. “Good.” He stood and straightened his robes, casting a small charm wandlessly to get rid of the wrinkles that came so easy to linen clothes. “I will see you in the evening, Severus. Come, Henry, drink your potions, we need to get going, you do not want to be late to your first lesson on Ancient Runes this afternoon.”

Taking the first of the row of small vials, Henry made a grimace at the taste after swallowing the potions.

They left the study, Severus to stay the rest of the day at Malfoy Manor, Marvolo and Henry to go to Diagon Alley.

oooOOooo

As Lucius came into his study, shortly after a long and nice breakfast, he found his friend sitting on the love-seat in front of the fireplace, clutching his hands together and staring at the cold hearth.

Determined to lighten the mood, he sat down on a chair next to the love-seat and said in a teasing tone, “Narcissa is delighted by the prospect of helping you find a bride. She is currently in matchmaker heaven.”

Lucius was taken aback, when Severus’ only response to the teasing was a tired glance from under his curtain of black silky hair. Sighing, he let the teasing rest and searched for words to get his friend to share what troubled him so. “What troubles you so, Severus? Don’t carry all your worries alone. You do remember that we are friends, don’t you?” Lucius started to worry as the dark-
haired wizard let his head sink into his hands at this. What was the problem? Was Severus in danger from their Lord because of the situation with Dumbledore?

Luckily Severus was not inclined to let him suffer too long, not knowing what was going on. Even though the blond man did not understand where he was going at first. “Do you know why I was selected to spy on Dumbledore all those years ago?”

“Because you are an excellent potioneer and there was a spot open for the Potions Professor on Hogwarts staff?” Lucius offered.

“Partially,” Severus agreed. “But the real reason was, that my Occlumency skills are so good, I can keep the Headmaster out of my head and even lie to him without being suspected.”

Severus fell silent again, until Lucius got impatient and prompted, “Well?”

“This is also the reason why Dumbledore believes me to be his spy in the Dark Lord's ranks.”

The Potions Master fell silent again, and Lucius tried to untangle the hints dropped by his friend. “You're trying to tell me that Dumbledore believes that you're able to lie to our Lord?”

Nodding in agreement, Severus elaborated, “He not only believes, but knows. I am able to lie to both of them.” Leaning forward, resting his arms on his knees, he let his hair fall to cover his face, staring at the hand-woven carpet under his feet.

Understanding dawned for Lucius. If his friend was able to lie to their Lord, the man could not be certain that Severus was still loyal to him. That was certainly a reason to be so gloomy. “Is there a way…” Lucius trailed off, unsure how to even ask what was on his mind. He had suspected for a while now that Severus had come to waver in his loyalty at the end of the last war. And how could he fault him, as it was obvious that their Lord had lost some of his sanity by then? But speaking out loud of such things was just not done.

Severus took the more acceptable meaning and answered another unasked question. “There is a potion that forces an Occlumence to lower all protections.” The dark-haired man shuddered. Taking that as confirmation that his friend was still loyal and willing to prove it, Lucius simply asked, “When?”

“Tonight after dinner.” Severus leant back and let his head sink onto the back of the love-seat, closing his eyes. It was obvious that his friend was distressed about this, but not really why he was so worked up. Hoping that it was only because Severus did not like anyone knowing much about him, and not his desire to hide something crucial from their Lord, Lucius decided it was time to distract his friend and bring another worrisome topic forward. “Let us get your mind on something else.” Severus looked up, raising a brow questioningly. “Narcissa is waiting in the family parlour, she wants to plan some social events.”

Severus groaned, a matchmaking Narcissa had been his nightmare a few years ago.

“Now, now, my friend. You heard the orders as well as I did. Do you want to find your own bride, or do you want our Lord to select for you?”

Standing, Severus answered with a poor attempt at humour, “After tonight he might be the person most suited to pick for me.”

Laughing, Lucius led his friend from the study and over to the parlour. Best to keep him occupied with other things until the evening than letting him wallow in misery.
After a short visit to the optician, Harry walked alongside Voldemort down Diagon Alley towards Gringotts.

Harry liked his new glasses and had been pleasantly surprised when Voldemort did not insist on one particular style, or restricted the amount of money to be spent. So the young wizard had been able to browse the available selection at his leisure and select the glasses that appealed to him. He still was not sure if he wanted to take the potion to correct his eyesight. It would be neat not to need glasses, but the fact that the potion was considered dark irked him.

As they passed the shops on both sides of the alley, Harry was aware that they were being stared at. Witches and Wizards came to the windows of the shops, stopped in the middle of the street, even turned to walk past them a second time, to stare at them and whisper about them with those next to them.

They were also followed by two wizards that Harry had last seen that night in the graveyard. Mr. Goyle and Mr. Crabbe had met them at the entrance to Diagon Alley, to be their lookouts and guards. Voldemort had insisted, and Harry had not dared to make much of a fuss. They both had been polite enough, and after two tries by enraged wizards to come near them, shouting something about necromancers and evil reincarnate, Harry was glad the two wizards had their backs. If he had to walk beside Voldemort through Diagon Alley, he’d best have someone there who was willing to protect him. He felt strange thinking this, but that made it not any less true.

Ascending the stairs leading up to the entrance of the bank, Harry wondered what this appointment would bring to light. Voldemort had said that they had to be related in some way, as there was no way anyone outside of the Slytherin family could be a parslemouth. Of course Harry had disagreed. He remembered well the day Dumbledore had told him that the night Voldemort had tried to kill him as a baby, some of the dark wizard's power had been transferred to the toddler. The teen had not told this to the man, not sure if it would be something the Headmaster would want their enemy to know.

But thinking about their appointment brought a question back into Harry’s mind that he had forgotten about as he saw the wizards waiting for them an hour earlier. “Why do we have to go to the goblins to get this ancestry test done, sir?”

“During one of the earlier goblin wars, around 845 I think, a peace treaty was made.” They stepped into the enormous hall and got in line at one of the counters. “At that time the goblins fought to not be hunted by wizardkind to be used as potions ingredients. Some part of them is used in the potion needed to perform the most effective ancestry test. We know some others, to test for paternity, and who the grandparents were, but to get a whole family tree, this potion is needed.” Harry was amazed at how easily Voldemort fell into lecture mode and tried not to look too excited at getting something explained without being scolded for not knowing it before or even for asking. “To get peace once again, the wizards of that time agreed to hand over all knowledge of this potion, or destroy it, in exchange for a promise from the goblins that they would offer to perform this test for wizards. For a fee, of course.” Harry nodded to confirm that he understood, and the other wizard added a bit more explanation. “This is believed to be the start of this bank, and one of the reasons why goblins are almost always involved in marriage contracts, wills, and other matters where family connections are important.”
As it was now their turn at the counter, they stepped forward, and with a curt nod to the goblin behind the counter, Voldemort stated their intentions. “I am here to get an ancestry test for my adopted son,” here he pointed at Harry standing by his side, “formerly known by the name of Harry James Potter.”

With much too much teeth shown – was this a grin or a snarl? – the goblin gave a tiny bell a shake, and another goblin came from somewhere in the back. “Follow Grookfangs, he will conduct the test.”

They did as told and were led into a small office with a nice marble floor, expensive mahogany furniture, and some lethal-looking weapons and martial wall hangings, depicting battle scenes, as decoration. Sitting down, Harry watched with a foreboding feeling as the goblin got an oddly off-colour parchment and an ornate silver dagger out of a small cabinet standing at the far wall.

Laying both items on the desk in front of the teenager, the goblin smiled/sneered again. “You will have to prick a finger or make a cut on your palm and let at least three, better seven, drops of blood fall onto the parchment. Nothing simpler.”

Harry was fairly sure that “even a wizard should be able to do it” was added, even if not spoken out loud. So he took up the dagger, quite heavy for such a small weapon, and turned his left hand so the palm was facing up, gathering his courage.

Moving the blade over his palm with almost no pressure – goblin made weapons were sharp – Harry made a shallow cut, tilting his hand so that the blood could fall onto the parchment. Almost the moment the first drop hit, splattering small droplets in all directions, writing began surfacing out of the parchment. It started with his name, as it was now, Henry James Slytherin-Potter, followed by the names of his father and mother. The names of his father’s parents were easily to read, Charlus and Dorea Potter, with Dorea born a Black, but the names of Lily’s parents were only blurs. From there the tree branched out, getting more and more branches. Only the parents of a person were shown, no siblings, so this was not a full family tree, only the direct ancestors of Harry. He got to see that the Potters had married into a lot of other families, and he was related to most of his classmates in one way or another.

It got really interesting once the names on the Evans side of his ancestry started to be readable. There was an Alana Gaunt who married a Lionel Evans some five generations back. Her name was barely legible, as was her husband’s. His parents were only nameless blobs, but four generations before that there was a Malfoy who had married a nameless blob.

Harry was mesmerized by the gentle growing of his family tree. He did not pay attention to his surroundings, not registering that Voldemort gently took his hand and cast a small healing charm on the cut, closing it. Following the tree up from the names on his mother’s side it became obvious that names started to appear on both sides, but the Gaunts were only present on his mother’s side. From “Gaunt” the name changed to “Selvyn” and then to “Slytherin”. As it reached ancestors who had no last names, the growing stopped, and the parchment was now several times larger than at the start of the process.

Harry was still too much in awe to react as Voldemort tapped on the tree, right at the parents of Alana Gaunt. “These are on my tree too. It seems we have found the connection. That is curious indeed,” Voldemort murmured, tracing the tree with his right index finger.

Harry could only agree. It seemed that his mother was not truly a muggle-born witch with no wizarding ancestors, but a witch descending from a really old family. Still in a daze and truly confused, Harry was led from the bank and back to the point they would apparate from.
There was no denying it any more. He was related to Voldemort. The man who had killed his parents really was family. He had problems wrapping his mind around this new shocking information.

Walking beside his adopted son, Voldemort was equally stunned and silent.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Falling Walls

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lunch at Nott House had been a quiet affair. Theodore and his father had exchanged looks, wondering what had happened, and tried to keep a conversation going. It was a hopeless case, though, as both house guests seemed to be deep in thought.

Now Theodore and Harry were sitting in the school room, listening to Mr. Dorian, the tutor that Lord Nott had hired for his son’s lessons. Harry had feared at first that he would have trouble concentrating after the revelations of the morning. But the subject was captivating, and he found himself studying the first few runes with interest. After Mr. Dorian had listed all the possible applications for runes, wards, and permanently enchanted objects, like coats with warming charms, the teen had wondered why he had let himself be talked into taking the easy classes by Ron.

Harry was glad he now got the opportunity to change his classes, dropping Divination that had proven to be a waste of his time, and taking up Ancient Runes, which sounded interesting and like something he might actually use one day.

Together with the usefulness of the name change, the uncovered family relation between himself and Voldemort and the fact that he was cared for, at least regarding all his material and health needs, he started to fear that he would get to like the people he was surrounded by. And this thought alone made him feel uncomfortable. Why should he fear to get to like someone? Theodore had been nice enough. Healer Greengrass had been nice – for a healer poking him – and had accepted his decision to not use the ritual. Lord Nott had been nice, even if he was a Death Eater. He was also Theodore’s father and lived in a cheerful house, not matching what was speculated about Slytherin homes by the Gryffindors. Maybe he should try to see what was really there, how the people acted, and not just take the rumours and prejudices repeated over and over for the truth.

After an hour the lesson was wrapped up, Harry was given a book to read and a few runes to draw repeatedly to memorize them, and Theodore was handed a longer text to translate. After the always happily smiling teacher had left, Harry and Theodore stayed a little longer, tidying up the room.

While Harry was wiping the blackboard and Theodore swept the floor of the wood shavings resulting from the carving exercises he had done during the lesson, the older teen gathered his courage and started. “Henry, I wanted to ask you something.”

Looking over his shoulder to the other boy, Harry asked with a cautious look, “And what did you want to ask?”

“My birthday is in the middle of our end-of-year exams. That is why I usually have a party sometime during the summer.” He stopped what he was doing and leant on the broom. “That party will be tomorrow. Some of my friends will be coming over, there'll be something to eat and we'll play Quidditch.” He took a deep breath. “I want you to come too.”

Harry turned around and was now facing the other teen. “Are you serious?” He sounded exasperated. “A whole afternoon alone with the people who've done nothing but ridicule and taunt me? You're okay, but I don't really want to meet the rest.”

Theodore stood a while, contemplating. Harry just stared at him, past hurts clearly visible on his face. “I know that Draco is quite bad,” Theodore replied. “But what have the other's done?
Daphne? Blaise? What have I done?”

Harry noticed that Malfoy's bookends and the girl Parkinson had not been mentioned, but it was of no real importance either way. “And what was last year? The incident with those buttons?” As Theodore just stood there, looking uncomprehendingly at his house guest, Harry elaborated, “Potter stinks? Doesn't ring a bell?” He turned with a huff, attacking the blackboard with more fervour than before.

Finally understanding what the younger boy wanted to say, Theodore got a sheepish look about him. And the embarrassment was clear as day in his voice as he answered, “Well, it's not exactly easy to decline a button given out at the entrance to the common room when everyone is on the way to breakfast.” As Harry seemed to ignore him, he added with a little anger in his voice, “Tell me, what House do you cheer for during a Quidditch match against Slytherin? I'll tell you: whatever House we're playing against!” He threw the broom away, and it landed with a clatter on the floor. “And it's not only for Quidditch. I tried to befriend a few Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, no need trying for a Gryffindor. And even though they said I was nice enough, they didn't want to be seen with me. Didn't want to be seen with a Slytherin.”

Harry realised with a pang of guilt that this was true. He had assumed that this arrangement would only last for the summer, never once had it crossed his mind that they could continue on the small path to friendship once back at Hogwarts.

“We'll stick together no matter what, when not in our common room. We cannot hope to find friends elsewhere, and we can't risk appearing weak and divided. So, sorry if I appeared to be a bully, it wasn't by choice.”

Both boys stood in silence for a while. Both embarrassed over the loss of control in front of one from the opposite House.

It was Harry who finally broke the uneasy silence. “I’m sorry. You are nice, I think, and most of the bad stuff was started by Malfoy.” He rubbed his neck. “I would like to meet some of the others.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, “But if Malfoy gets too annoying, I will leave. Is that okay?” Seeing that Theodore still had his hands clenched into fists by his side and was staring at the floor, he tried to get some semblance of order in his thoughts. “See, I'm totally confused at the moment. Too much has changed in the last days. You've been nice and helpful and...“ he huffed in frustration, this was entirely too hard. “I want to get to know you. Away from all this House rivalry. But I don't think that Malfoy will help matters.”

Taking a few deep breaths, Theodore turned to Harry. “You're my guest, we're not at school, so the rules are different. And if Draco is a prat, you can go to your room. But I don't think he will be. The adults will be here too, so... I don't think that he or any of the others will be a problem.”

After that they cleaned up the rest of the room together and went to the library, Harry to write letters to his friends and read his books, and Theodore to work on his summer homework. It was a little awkward, but Harry had the feeling that they had made a big step in getting to know each other. He just had to give the Slytherins a chance, especially those that had never actively participated in the bullying.

ooOoo
Theodore sat working on his Potions essay. He was a little smug, because he had found a way to get Henry to reconsider his beliefs about Slytherins. He had known that simply stating the facts in a clear and calm manner would not convince the Gryffindor that he was speaking the truth. So he had dropped his control and brought his emotions forward. And it appeared to have worked. And it had felt good. Not something he would do often, but once in a while, to reach a goal and get the frustration out of his system, was acceptable. So tomorrow he would get a chance to establish his place as a friend and advisor to the heir of Lord Slytherin in front of the other Slytherins.

At the start of summer, his father had said that he could not promise his son that he could hold his party this year. With the Dark Lord in their house, it might not have been possible. Considering the possible complications of a slightly mad man staying, he understood but was sad none the less. But now, the man had been proven to be sane and quite nice company, so the party would be held. Theodore suspected that the Dark Lord had ordered his father to organize the gathering, so Henry would get the opportunity to meet with the others. Not that he would complain, this was better than missing out on the party.

He opened the book he was using as reference, inked his quill, and started on a rough draft of his essay.

At the same time Lord Slytherin and Lord Nott were sitting in the study on the ground floor, with a nice view of the rose garden at the back of the house.

They had tea sitting on the desk between them, Marvolo sitting behind the desk as if this was his study. He really needed to look over the houses he now had available, so he and Henry could move, and he no longer had to borrow studies from his followers.

Benjamin looked on curiously as he pulled out the folded family tree and laid it flat on the unoccupied part of the desk.

“Do you think it is possible for you to find records on Squibs that were born into the Nott family in the last two hundred years?” Red eyes fixed on the point on Henry’s tree where there was a Squib of his own family that had married another Squib, just to have at least one muggle child together. It went against everything he thought he knew about the way magic was passed on from parents to their children. He had thought that magic was lost when a squib was born, but it seemed to only go dormant for a few generations, only to resurface again some decades later.

In a way, this could prove useful for his plans. It would be so much easier to get the pureblood families to accept muggle-borns – well they needed a new term for them – if they were distant descendants from their own families. But for this to work, he would need to track the ancestry, without going to Gringotts. At least to begin with, it would be best to not attract too much attention.

Benjamin gave him a puzzled look. “I'm not sure,” he answered, obviously thinking about the problem. “There are the family tomes, of course, but normally there wouldn't be anything written about such failures.” He drummed the fingers of his right hand lightly on the desk. “All children born are named, with date of birth, parents, and so on. Maybe I can compile a list and see what is written about each of them. I would guess that Squibs are just not mentioned after the point they were identified.” The older-looking wizard frowned. “May I ask why you want this list?”
By way of explanation Marvolo turned the tree, so Benjamin could get a good look at it. “This is the ancestry test we had made this morning for Henry. And here,” he laid his finger on the crucial point, “Is a Squib of the Gaunt family, married to a man who is also noted as a Squib.” He moved his finger down the line until he reached the name of Lily Potter née Evans, “And this is the first witch born in generations from this family. But the magic did not come out of nowhere. She actually was family to me.”

Benjamin’s eyes grew bigger at this explanation, he leant forward and let his gaze wander up the part of the tree that was mostly muggle, and thus unreadable, but had sprinkles of Squib names here and there.

“But this… this implies that all Squibs thrown out to live with muggles are responsible for the catastrophe of witches and wizards born to muggles!”

“It would seem so,” Marvolo confirmed in an even tone. “We need to find the families that have dormant magical blood, and we need to bring the Squibs back.” He sighed, “But one step at a time.” He took the tree and folded it back again. “I want to bring magical orphans and those that are in foster care back into our world as fast as possible. I want to place them with good, traditional families, so they can learn our way of living.”

Benjamin nodded thoughtfully and listened with rapt attention, while Marvolo explained his plan for the children. “I would like to place them with actual family. But as I want us to use the muggle system for the adoption, we would need to know of the family connection before they are brought into our world.”

Now Benjamin looked apprehensive “You wanted to speak with me about the order to marry and get children?”

Understanding the man’s worries – he just could not see himself with another woman than his beloved Juliet – Marvolo attempted a friendly and soothing smile. “I do not require you to marry, but I want you to adopt at least two more children. You could hire a nanny, a Squib maybe? And fill this house with the laughter of small, happy little witches and wizards again.”

Benjamin smiled relieved, a little amused over the rather overdone speech about children. By the way Marvolo smirked, it was done on purpose, maybe to lighten the mood. Which it certainly did.

“I also want you to visit with the others and deliver my task to them. I need time to check over the houses, so Henry and I can move. I want to have it done well before my son’s birthday.”

Giving an almost-bow in his Lord’s direction, Benjamin answered, “I'll pass the task along, my Lord.” Benjamin was one of the Death Eaters who were faster in picking up the right pattern of when to treat him in what role. “And I'll make sure that all guests for tomorrow's little get-together can come.”

They both rose from their chairs, the tea set vanishing from the desk, collected by one of the elves, one to go over to the Malfoys, the other to check out the one Manor and the town houses he deemed suitable for his son and him to live in.

oooOOooo

While Lucius and Severus had a nice, long chat with Narcissa, later joined by Benjamin, Draco sat
in the garden with Vincent and Gregory, complaining about his school rival.

“It's so irritating, that Potter is getting everything handed to him. House points for breaking the rules, getting on the Quidditch team as a first-year, flying on the bloody hippogriff, all the teachers simply love him!”

He listed all the unfair happenings around the Potter git, and listed them again. He worked himself up to the point he could no longer sit still, and started to pace up and down in front of the others.

On the first train ride to Hogwarts, he had tried to make friends with Potter, and he had rejected him. That had hurt. So he convinced himself that he did not want to be friends with Harry Potter. And now he had to try to become his friend again. On his father’s orders, no less. He saw that it was a smart move, to be friends with the son of the man he would swear his loyalty to, once he was of age. But he saw no way to achieve this. He huffed in frustration and stalked in tight circles over the well-tended grass.

Greg and Vince were not particularly helpful, but they were patient and listened to his tirade. He was aware that he was behaving like a child. Today he could be like this, but tomorrow he would have to be grown up and swallow his pride, to try to make amends. He only hoped that Theo had not made his task impossible.

After over an hour of aimless rambling and pacing, Greg got his two friends to the Quidditch pitch and they started to fly. A much better way to spend an afternoon.

oooOOooo

Sirius breathed heavily, trying to control his anger, crumpling the parchment of a Ministry letter in his hand. Across from him, at the other end of the table, sat Dumbledore, for once not with madly twinkling eyes.

The others, namely all the Weasleys, save the older sons, and Hermione, were looking on with a horrified fascination, normally reserved for the most gruesome accidents. They really did not want to watch, but could not look away.

Half an hour before, there had been an owl from the Ministry again, delivering the letter summoning Sirius to his own trial on Monday, the seventeenth of July. Sirius was elated over the prospect of gaining his freedom, the ability to walk into Diagon Alley and buy something, or going to the Leaky Cauldron and drink a butterbeer. He could not wait to share the good news. Peter Pettigrew and Lord Slytherin had been named witnesses, as Shacklebolt had told him in passing a day ago, so he was pretty sure that he would be cleared.

The twins and Arthur had been happy for him, and started making plans for what he could do once he was no longer a wanted man. And then Dumbledore had come to the house. It had gone quickly downhill from there.

The old Headmaster had not been happy to learn that he had not been told about the impending trial, and accused Sirius of being ungrateful and working against the Order. Never mind that the few aurors in their ranks had known as well. The whole department still talked about the furious Madame Bones storming into the office Monday morning, demanding preparations for a trial to be
started as fast as possible.

Sirius jkhad brought up the point that he could take up his seat on the Wizengamot, after his name had been cleared. As Albus no longer was part of the Wizengamot, they needed a new set of eyes and ears in the meeting of Lords and Ladies.

Dumbledore deflected this reasonable idea by suggesting that it was a trap to lure him out and that he could not risk placing himself in danger, now that Harry needed him more than before. As this did not have the desired effect – Sirius only sneered – he changed tactics again, claiming that Sirius was not capable of handling the responsibilities of a Lordship and had best go on a long vacation to heal after his long stay in Azkaban.

“You meddling old fool! First you claim that I can’t risk contact with the Ministry for fear of a trap and the fact that my godson needs me, and now you want to send me on a long vacation?” Sirius growled out, sounding remarkably like his animagus form.

“Now, my boy, you clearly are distraught. Maybe you should take a calming draught. I only have your best interest in mind. It's no wonder that the long stay in Azkaban has affected your health. I think...”

With a growl of frustration Sirius interrupted the grandfatherly drawl of the man he had once looked up to. This was enough, he no longer would put up with the Headmaster deciding his every move. “As you seem to want to treat me like a child, I don't want you here any longer, Albus! Leave my house. And you should find another place to use as headquarters.” With this decision made at long last, he felt calmer and much more like himself. He turned to the elder Weasleys and smiled at them. “You can stay here, if you don't feel comfortable returning to the Burrow.”

A little shaken, Arthur nodded. “That would be good.”

Albus stood next to the kitchen table, dumbstruck and not preparing to leave.

Sirius glared in the old man’s direction. “Leave, or I will use the wards to throw you out of my house!”

Without a word the Headmaster gathered his robes around him, nodded in Arthur’s and Molly’s direction, and left.

Sirius took a deep breath and made his way to the wardstone down in the basement. He needed to adjust the wards. And after that he would have to write a response to Madame Bones, and find a solicitor. No time to lose. He wondered idly what Moony would say to this.

oooOOooo

After dinner Marvolo went into the study to prepare. He set up candles for soft light and transformed one of the visitor chairs into a wingback chair.

Only minutes after he was finished with his preparations, he felt a person crossing some of the wards he had set up and not yet fully activated. A moment later there was a knock on the door. “Come in, Severus,” he called out.

Severus stepped in, closed the door, and sank gracefully into a kneeling position, head bowed.
Setting two vials filled with potion down on the desk, Marvolo sat down on a stool in front of the new, well-padded wingback chair regarding his Potions Master.

The man seemed calm and collected on the surface, but he was anything but calm. “Do you want to talk before we start?”

Nodding, Severus took a shaking breath and directed his gaze up to his Lord’s eyes. “When I realised that Lily became your target, my Lord, I did not only beg you to spare her. I also went to Dumbledore to warn him, and by extension her.” He closed his eyes, steeling his resolve before he opened them again. “He demanded I spy for him, and I did. I would have done anything to get my Lily to safety again.” Severus watched his Lord with wary eyes, and as the man only waited calmly for the kneeling wizard to continue, he got to the next bit of his story. “After the night she died, I wanted to die as well.” He struggled to keep the tears from falling. “Dumbledore used my mourning, my despair and guilt, to bind me with an oath. He was sure you would be back, my Lord. And I could not bear the thought that the last bit of Lily would vanish as well.”

Marvolo listened with rapt attention. The Potions Master sounded sincere, but so had he all the other times he had told lies. But tonight he would see for himself what the truth was. But first he needed to calm the man down a little more. The task would be easier on him if the man did not attempt to struggle and was calmer overall.

“Regardless of what I will find in your mind tonight, I do not intend to kill you. But my findings will determine how much you will know and how deeply you will be involved.” Still kneeling just inside the door, Severus breathed in a pattern Marvolo recognized as one from the typical calming exercises taught for meditation. “Two tasks are set: Tutoring my son, and brewing the potions he will need to overcome the damage done by those vile muggles.” Marvolo smirked inwardly at seeing a spark of hatred in the dark eyes of the spy. Good. Hatred for the people who had harmed his son was an emotion he could approve of. “Come here Severus.”

Cautiously the man stood and sat in the wingback chair his Lord indicated. Both potion vials rose from the desk and floated over to the two men. “This,” Marvolo took the vial nearest to him, containing a light lavender coloured, milky liquid, “is a strong calming potion. It will hopefully help in dampening the panic you most likely will feel after your shields are rendered useless.”

Severus nodded reluctantly.

“The other will lower those impressive shields around your mind.” He handed Severus the calming potion and grasped the other vial with the extremely obscure potion out of the air, removing the stopper.

“Down with it, Severus,” he said in a hard, commanding voice. He did not like the fact that his suspicions had been proven correct. That he had miscalculated so badly and had not seen that Severus would change his allegiance over a witch.

With shaking hands, the Potions Master opened the vial in his hand and, after sniffing at it, downed it with one big gulp. Marvolo smirked despite himself, old habits died hard.

The effect was almost immediate. His eyes began to droop, the shaking lessened and then vanished altogether, the dark man’s breathing evened out and became deeper. Knowing that the man was now no longer capable of doing much on his own, Marvolo stood and conjured some silken ropes to bind the man to the chair he was sitting in. All texts he had read concerning the potion he was about to use, mentioned that strong Occlumence were known to jerk around while under the influence of it. And as he needed to keep eye contact, that was not an option. He did not want to cause any permanent damage to his Potions Master, after all.
Gently tipping the head of the younger wizard back, Marvolo let the potion, stinking of foul eggs, flow into the slightly opened mouth, causing Severus to swallow sluggishly.

Fixing his head to the wing chair, Marvolo began to prepare himself for the task before him. He started with activating the wards keeping everyone away, he could not afford to be interrupted. Next he made himself more comfortable on his low stool, casting a cushioning charm on the hard seat. Lastly he cast a curse on Severus that would keep the man’s eyes open until it was removed. He saw the raw terror in the dark, almost black, eyes. Gently picking up one of Severus’ hands, placing his own fingers so he could monitor the heartbeat, he met the dazed and panicked gaze and delved into the usually well-protected mind.

First he moved through the panic and fear that dominated the thoughts of the Potions Professor. He carefully erected a weak barrier around those feelings, containing them so they would not get in his way, making sure that barrier would fall as soon as Severus’ shields came back up.

Then he started his search for the crucial memories and thoughts. He started with Lily. She was the reason Severus had turned traitor, so he needed to see exactly what had happened. The first memories were of two children, friends spending time together, peaceful afternoons in the park and with Lily’s parents – at least he thought they were her parents. And always linked with those happy memories, the contrasting ones from Severus’ home. Those he had seen before, as Severus had shown him his motivation to join him, his reason to hate muggles. As the years of Hogwarts raced past his eyes, he realized that Lily Evans had been the young Severus’ only happiness. No wonder a threat to her had shaken his loyalty.

He saw the night Severus had taken the Mark, and felt how good the young man had felt despite the pain. He saw the day he had heard the first part of a prophecy. Felt the shock seeing the announcement of the birth of the son of James and Lily Potter, painting a big target on his only true friend. Saw the moment Dumbledore had wrenched the oath out of the grieving man.

Marvolo moved with the utmost care from memory to memory, getting to more recent ones. It was obvious that Severus did not enjoy teaching young students, preferring to tutor those that had talent for the subtle art.

On more than one occasion, Marvolo got to witness Severus resenting an order given by Dumbledore, the old man using guilt to get the younger wizard to do his bidding.

Marvolo saw the world through the other wizard’s eyes, and what he saw answered the question he wanted the answer to. Severus Snape wanted to preserve traditions, and he did not see the reason to eradicate the so-called dark arts. Monitor, yes. Make sure those that learned them knew what they were doing, yes. But not ban them. He wanted to change the world he lived in. And neither of his masters had the right way to go about it.

Retreating, Marvolo found himself in the study again. The candles were almost gone, and one look at the clock told him that he had been in the other's mind for close to four hours. Standing up and working the kinks out of his back, Marvolo lifted the curse holding the Potions Master’s eyes open. Carefully removing the ropes and checking that he had not done too much damage, he yawned. Time to go to bed. He lowered the wards and left the study, the floating body of his follower behind him. He would settle him into the room prepared for this occasion, and go to his own room without further delay.

ooOoo
Trapped in his body by the extremely powerful calming potion, Severus cried silent tears. To live through all those memories again had been painful. To see what he had hidden for so long in the dark of his mind behind his most potent shields had opened old wounds.

But he could feel what the man invading his mind had felt. Whether by accident or on purpose, he didn't know. Just that it had given him another point of view on his own life. There was no point in dwelling in the past. If he wanted to make a difference, he needed to live in the present, not the past.

He would not forget the first and only woman he had ever loved. But he would strive to change the magical world to a better place for her son. And maybe the Dark Lord was the person capable of bringing the changes needed.

Dumbledore was pacing in his office, wondering when his plans had started to go so horribly wrong. He never would have thought Tom sane enough to try for a political approach. And now he had lost control of Harry to him, of all people, and if Sirius' name was cleared, he would not regain that control, even if they managed to somehow get the boy back.

He was almost certain now that he understood what had happened on that Halloween night. He was not happy with his findings, but he needed Harry to behave a certain way. If he did not find a way to sever the link, there was only one way to make Tom mortal once more.

With a sigh the Headmaster moved to his desk. He still needed to find a new Defence against the Dark Arts Professor, and on top of that, he now had to search for a new headquarters. He was getting too old for this.

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
Walking into the dinning room for breakfast the next morning, Harry was surprised to find Snape sitting at the table with the others.

The man seemed to be paler than usual, something the teen had not thought possible. Like the Potions Professor had not slept well, or was having a headache.

Another thing had him curious. Beside Voldemort’s chair stood a basket full with letters and scrolls. Instead of reading the Daily Prophet, like the last days, he had a letter in hand and dropped it, just to take another from the basket, the moment Harry became aware of this oddity. Seeing the gaze of the teen falling to the basket Voldemort explained “The Prophet delivered the applications for your history tutor today. The ones I have read so far,” he indicated a small stack of parchment to the left of his plate, “Where not very promising yet.” With a flick of his hand he sliced the top of the envelope open, taking the letter out. “Have you slept well, Henry?”

Thrown by the kind inquiry, Harry merrily nodded and answered with a soft “I have, sir.” and sat down on his usual chair.

Like every other day the selection of breakfast foods was vast and Harry had a hard time to decide what to eat. He finally settled on grilled mushrooms, tomatoes and scrambled egg with some toast. They would mask the taste of his potions best. Yesterday he had spent studying and reading, trying to put as much knowledge into his head as he possibly could, and he intended to do so today too.

Conversation at the table consisted only of Theodore and his father hashing out the last details for the big party this afternoon. From what Harry was able to gather, there would be most of the Slytherins from Theodore’s year present, and some of their parents. The way Lord Nott spoke of them, most likely Death Eaters, all of them. But as Harry was confident he only needed to really interact with the other children, he tried to ignore this.

“There was a Hadrian Selwyn a few years younger than my father. Wasn’t there?” Lord Nott suddenly asked with a surprised expression. Happily nodding, Voldemort almost grinned and confirmed “Yes, two years I think. To funny that Binns is so out of sync with time, that he writes a report on a student that is grown by now, and has grandchildren already.”

Startling almost out of his chair, Harry suppressed the urge to giggle, eyeing the monster turned man, at least in appearance, with barely failed horror. There was again the happiness that was not his own, encroaching on his feelings, making him want to run and never stop.

He needed a moment to register that Voldemort spoke to him holding out the thick letter with his teachers reports. “Henry? Are you alright?” Harry frowned as a brief flicker of concern washed
over him, shaking his head he raised his gaze and apologized “Sorry, I was lost in thought.” Patiently Voldemort repeated what he already had said three times. “Do you want to read it yourself?”

“I very much would like that, sir.” The teen answered taking the reports and starting to read them.

While the low murmur of conversation between the four other wizards faded into the background, Harry concentrated on the reports given by his teachers. He only shortly skimmed over the report from Binns, confirming for himself, that the ghost had written a report that had nothing to do with Harry. Then he proceeded to the other reports, starting with the one from Professor McGonagall.

There was a common pattern to the reports. All of the professors wrote, with different words, that they thought he was capable of more, if he only would apply himself more to his work. And his handwriting was mentioned by all of them as well. A blushed creped up his neck as they all criticised his sometimes illegible script.

He was glad Theodore had shown him how to prepare a quill properly, and even was thankful that the healer had found the old break in his wrist and was going to do something about it. And there it was again, something good coming out of the fact his mortal enemy had adopted him. He breathed deeply, like he had read in the book about meditation, and remembered himself of his resolve to use what he could get out of the position he was in. And if that included getting a better handwriting, so be it. At least his professors would cease to complain about not being able to read his essays properly.

There was a little part of him worrying that he would become grateful for what Voldemort did, and that would be weird. So he ignored that thought for the moment in favour of reading the report of one Severus Snape.

He was a little curious if the report would be like the normal lashing he would get in class, or if the dour man had managed to be professional about it.

As it turned out the potions professor had been professional. Besides his complains about Harry’s writing he remarked about the lack of structure in Harry’s essays, his glaring lack in respect for the Potions Professor, the fact he did not seem able to follow instructions written on the board and his lack of understanding for the importance of several different ways to prepare, stir or otherwise manipulate the ingredients.

Harry had to concede that the man had a point. But he could not forget how much he had looked forward to his first Potions class, only for his interest to be crushed by the teacher, that very first lesson.

Finished with the reports, folding them again, Harry let his gaze wander to the black haired man on the opposite side of the table. Observing the man, pouring a new cup of coffee and adding several spoons full of honey, Voldemort’s words came to mind. That the Potions Professor would be sufficiently motivated. Taking in the abnormal pale complexion Harry vowed to himself that he would do his best to actually learn from the Professor during the tutoring lessons.

Ah relieved exclamation from Voldemort dragged Harry out of his musings. “At least one competent applicant. He taught at Hogwarts. What do you both think about Remus Lupin?”

Harry perked up at the name of his father’s friend. Theodore set his cup down and answered with a slight smile “He was one of the better professors for Defence. But he was fired because he is a werewolf.”
Shaking his head Harry corrected Theodore “No he resigned. He didn't want to wait to be fired. And he was our best teacher in Defence against the Dark Arts. He taught me the patronus charm.”

That got him some curious looks from the others. Voldemort shoot Snape a questioning look, prompting the man to answer the unspoken question. “I heard rumours. And I saw … your son … produce a patronus during a quidditch match. I did not quite catch if it was corporal or not.” Harry thought that the man’s voice was not as smooth as normal.

Finding himself under a contemplating gaze of Voldemort, Harry squirmed in his seat. “Do you think you could show us, Henry?”

Bewildered he fingered his wand that was placed in a robe pocket. “But, it is summer. We are not allowed to do magic out of school.”

Visibly suppressing a sigh, Voldemort nodded once, pinning Harry with his gaze. With a start the teen realized that the eyes were red, a deep burgundy red. “There are several exceptions to this rule. A child under the supervision of an adult wizard is allowed to cast. As is a child in danger.”

Harry spluttered “But that is totally unfair against all those that have no magical parents!” And he was even more perplexed as Voldemort nodded, smiling.

“It is, but if something goes wrong non-magical parents cannot do anything. So it wouldn't be safe for their child to practice magic. The Ministry is of the opinion that magical parents can supervise any magic practiced and are responsible enough to make sure their children do nothing too stupid.” The red eyed man gestured for Harry to go ahead.

That was a challenge he could not ignore. Maybe he would proof that Professor Lupin would make an excellent teacher. Closing his eyes, gripping the wand firmly in his hand, Harry concentrated to find a thought happy enough to produce his patronus. He thought about Hermione, about Ron, about Sirius and Remus, who had applied for the job as his history tutor, caring for him. In a clear and strong voice he spoke the incantation “Expecto Patronum.” and in a blinding, white light his patronus, prongs, galloped out of his wand, circling the room and halting beside him, as if he wanted to be petted.

“Well done Henry.” praised Voldemort, and Harry felt a little pride quickly followed by horror at this evidence he came to hate the murderer of his parents a little less. “I will invite Mr. Lupin to an interview.” Red eyes wandered to the now slightly healthier looking Potions Master. “Why don’t you start with the first tutoring session for Henry, Severus? I am sure Benjamin will allow you to use the potions laboratory in the basement.”

Standing and giving a nod to the most powerful wizard in the room, Severus said “As you wish, sir.” before beckoning Harry to follow and leaving the room.

Walking down the hallway to the stairs, leading into the basement, Severus was aware of the teenager following him quietly. He still felt not well. His shields shaky and not back to their full strength, he was weary to spend a prolonged time in the presence of the boy, being so easily able to stir up his temper and his bad memories. Reminding himself that he had made an oath to protect the boy and the insight he had gained during the slow torture of the previous night, he calmed his
racing heart and tried to get rid of the lingering feeling of contempt and hatred towards an image of Harry Potter that could not be real. It was a fact that Lily’s son didn't grow up a pampered prince, waited on hand and foot by his relatives. He had seen the list of potions the boy needed to take, to overcome the damage done by those that were called family. He had brewed this potions. He had to accept that he didn't really know Harry Potter, he never had. And he knew all too well, that being expected to be a certain way could bring out the behaviour in the first place.

After a few minutes of silence they reached the well illuminated laboratory. Without a word they both entered and his pupil sat on the stool behind the workbench obediently.

Severus moved to one wall that had a blackboard on it, pacing a few times up and down. Finally he gathered his courage and turned to face his Lord’s adopted son.

“As I have been informed, you did not get the information normally given to children that grew up in the muggle world, before they start at Hogwarts, Mr. Slytherin.” He saw the boy flinch at his new name, but resolved to call him by his new name whenever possible, he needed to get accustomed to it.

“This did place you at a disadvantage. We will strife to rectify this negligence.” Walking over to a tool cabinet, Severus opened the doors with one of the few charms he could cast silent and without his wand. Inside he found a sturdy set of stirrers and knives. He took both out and walked over to the table, laying them before the teen.

The next fifteen minutes the Potions Master described the different tools, their material and form as well as the applications they had while brewing. He was surprised to find an eagerly listening student, who asked not unintelligent questions to clarify some points.

After that Severus moved on to the topic of preparation. For today he laid the focus on work with the knife, describing and demonstrating the difference between slicing, cutting, shredding, chopping and dicing. After that he gave his student a few different roots, a cutting board and a knife like all the students had, and set him to practice the techniques.

While the boy was concentrating on chopping a beetroot, getting the red juice all over his hands and the cutting board, Severus began setting up another batch of the nutrition potion. As he came back from one of the storage shelves the boy addressed him with a question.

“Do you know, sir, why I was not given the information pamphlets for muggle raised students?”

“I do not, Mr. Slytherin. Maybe there was a mix-up, because both your parents had been magical. In almost all cases only students born from muggles, are raised by them.” The boy huffed at the name, rolling his eyes, but seemed long past flinching.

“Sir?”

“Yes, Mr. Slytherin?” answered Severus, carefully measuring water and pomegranate juice for the base and thus not looking up from the beaker.

“The healer that came to check me over, said that there was a potion, that could repair my eyes.”

As this was no question, Severus waited, lighting a small flame under the cauldron, slowly heating the ingredients for the base, while starting to stir clockwise.

Hesitant the boy looked up from his work, setting the knife down. “I was told that the potion is considered dark, because it requires the blood of the person to be healed. I …” Emerald green eyes looked back down on the thin slices of beetroot “I wanted to ask, if you can explain to me why the
blood is needed. I know that it is illegal to reveal the recipe, but an explanation would be okay?"

Severus could see clearly how desperate Lily’s son was to find orientation again, after being tossed into foreign waters. He briefly contemplated how best to tackle this specific tangle of problems. In the long run it would probably be best if his friends only child would get a more rounded outlook on what was called The Dark Arts, than what he would get at Hogwarts. And best he was the one slowly introducing him than any of the others he would surely get into contact with during the rest of summer.

“This information you are asking for Mr. Slytherin, is undoubtedly the one the Ministry wanted to censor, as they declared this potion and several others similar to it dark. But as they have not explicitly stated this, I can, legally, explain this to you.” He lowered the heat under his cauldron, as required at this step, and got himself a board and knife to slice the parsley root. “The few drops of blood, that are added last, moments before consuming the potion, are required so that the healing properties of the potion can target the person. Without this alignment with the person to be healed, the effect would only be marginal and most likely temporary.”

“But,” Severus glanced up from his slicing to find a confused teen staring at him. “Why would that make the potion evil?” Severus flinched at the implied all dark is evil, and cleared his throat “It is the concept of targeting a potion to a person, through the use of their blood, that is considered dark. As you see it can be used for healing potions, to increase their effectiveness, but I could also use it to make a poison that will only affect one person.”

A horrified look came over the boy’s face. “You could dump it in a jug of juice and only the one targeted would suffer, even if more than one would drink from it!”

Nodding in assent, Severus could not stop the slightly snarky comment from slipping past his lips. “It seems all hope is not yet lost. You are right, Mr. Slytherin. And that is the reason all potions using blood in this manner were outlawed.”

Both picked up their work again and a comfortable silence – only broken by the sound of roots being cut and knifes coming in contact with wood – fell over the potions laboratory.

Severus could hear the boy mumbling under his breath “Why ban something useful, only because of that? The Ministry is barmy.” Smiling to himself, Severus started to concentrate fully on the potion he was brewing.

oooOOooo

In the Ministry offices Madame Bones was busy preparing the trail for Sirius Orion Black. Yesterday she had send him a letter informing him of the date. She hoped that he would turn up. Her letters had reached him so far, of that she was certain. But the customary tracking spells, placed on all Ministry owls, did not give more information than the fact, that the owls had not left London. So she assumed the last Black was somewhere in the city, probably under heavy wards.

Sighing, she tackled the newest stack of letters. They came in all times of day, and were delivered in batches from the post room, three times a day.

The amount of mail to her office had tripled since the day Lord Slytherin, she huffed, had adopted Harry Potter. Mostly it was bullocks, claims to have seen the man doing illegal stuff, that would
have been grounds to revoke his guardianship of the boy, and similar. Some were inquiries from concerned witches, mostly so far only three wizards had written such letters, about if the boy was save with a man that had been You-Know-Who once.

Sadly she could not simply toss the whole mail out, but had to open and read all of the missives. Half way through the pile the witch came about a more interesting letter. It had been send by none other than Sirius Black himself, addressed to her. Curious she opened the letter – checks for nasty surprises were made by the post room staff – flicked it open and started to read right away.

She was relieved to read that Black intended to come to his own trial. And she fully understood that he did not want to risk being in Ministry custody until the trial. He informed her that he was about to hire a solicitor to represent him in court, and that whoever he would choose would send a letter and arrange all matters that would come up.

With this worry out of the way Amelia had a much more relaxed day at work.

Marvolo was sitting in his borrowed study, in between meetings, checking his notes. He had been surprised how many of his followers could be considered special cases. He currently was working in reassuring them that they did not need to marry someone they could not stand at all. He still encouraged them to find a partner, and maybe look for a young squib woman to be part of their family and carry their children. Well the last only if they were men who preferred men. A pair of women just needed to decide which of them would carry the child.

Now he was exceedingly glad, he had taken all the journals out of the chamber of secrets before he had graduated. If he remembered correctly there had been some recipes for potions to get a woman pregnant, both parents would have to add something from themselves, but that should be easy enough.

Best to let Severus have a look at the notes, and work out a version that would work the way he wanted it to work.

Marvolo rubbed his eyes. There was another reason he had to speak with Severus soon. He had had odd bouts of fear, terror almost, and despair in the last days. He could not make out a reason, but he still could remember vividly, how he was assaulted by feeling again, after being reborn. He was not sure if this was another side effect of the ritual used to resurrect him.

To distract himself until the next of his followers came for a talk – it should be both of the Greengrasses – Marvolo got out one of the journals, turning the old and brittle pages softly with magic to the point where a potion named something along the lines of veil over past was described. It seemed that this one never was finished, because there was no finite name written down. Maybe Severus would be able to make use of the notes, so with red eyes trailing the squiggles of parseltcript, Marvolo started to translate the notes into English.
Pacing once again in his circular office, Albus Dumbledore was berating himself for the errors he had made the day before. He should not have reacted the way he did to Sirius’ desire to clear his name.

Now he had lost even more than if he had supported the wish. If, by what means he was unsure, they would manage to get custody over Harry again, he most likely would get under the custody of his godfather. Because there was no doubt in Albus’ mind that the court would rule in the last Black’s favour.

Had he not made this fatal error – that got him tossed out of Grimmauld Place – he at least would have some measure of control over Harry. Now the chances for him to play a significant role and be close to the boy, were slim at best.

Maybe it was not too late yet to mend the fences. Yes, he would write a letter, explaining that only worry had spoken yesterday. That he could not get the thought out of his head that this was an elaborate trap by Fudge, to lure Sirius out of hiding, to get him into his grasps, to administer the dementor’s kiss. If he was convincing enough it might work.

Maybe he could solve two problems at the same time. He still was searching for a new Defence Professor. Maybe Sirius would like to teach at Hogwarts. If Tom let Harry go to school the next year, he would get the opportunity to spend some time with his godson.

Happy with his idea Albus sat down behind his desk taking out a piece of parchment, picking up his favourite peacock quill and the emerald green ink, and started the letter.

The elves of House Nott had worked the entire morning to prepare the garden for the party Theodore held every year. Balloons of various cheerful colours, green, blue, yellow, orange and red, were floating in bundles over a long table laden with strawberry cake, ice cream, plates full of fruit, sandwiches and all other foods one could imagine to eat on a picnic. Marvolo stood in the shade of a pavilion in light robes of linen, over a shirt of silk and trousers of light wool. He had selected light colours and was curious to see how his Death Eaters would react to the unusual selection. Normally he preferred dark colours, but the day was hot enough that one should take advantage of even the simplest measures to keep cold. And casting a cooling charm was just not the same.

He nodded in approval to his son, as the teen stepped through the back door out onto the terrace followed closely by the Nott heir. Henry was wearing light clothes too, his shirt was short sleeved and the robes flowing and wide. Marvolo had instructed one of the elves to lay the clothes out for his son to wear, and he was happy to see, that the boy had complied.

He was equally happy about the report Severus had given him, after the first tutoring session with Henry. It seemed that they would be able to work together, moving past the difficult past they shared.

As a mark of his gratitude Marvolo had send the Potions Master on another mission to research and experiment. There were two potions he would need. Or more precisely, there were two ideas for potions, with notes and failed experiments written down. And as he himself had not the time, and not as much skill as Severus, he gave the task to his follower. He smiled at the memory of the
gleaming eyes and the eagerness he could sense from the man as he had bowed and accepted the translations Marvolo had prepared.

For his odd bouts of inexplicable emotions Severus had asked of him to keep a diary about when they happened, what he was doing, who was around him and what else might be of significance. It would be bothersome, but he had no choice but to agree that they needed more information to get to the bottom of this mystery.

One after the other the guests started to arrive, as he was not the host of this gathering, he could watch the Lords, Ladies and their children arrive by floo, greeting Benjamin and his son, who were standing next to the floo in the back parlour.

Soon the small tables were surrounded by chatting witches and wizards and the teenagers moved over to a large blanket under a tree, a little of to the side. Marvolo had watched from afar as Theodore had introduced his son to his friends from Slytherin. All children from his followers, so he was not concerned they could try to harm his son. But he still was curious how they would react to each other and the changed circumstances. So far it seemed to go as well as could be expected.

Satisfied that Theodore had the situation under control Marvolo shifted his focus to the adults. Lucius and Narcissa were moving in his direction. The blond Lord trying to decide how to act around his Lord at this gathering. Even so it only consisted of people that were loyal to the Dark Lord, there were a lot present that were not marked as Death Eaters. Marvolo was looking forward to let them all squirm a bit more.

“Lord Malfoy, what a pleasure to meet you again.” Marvolo greeted as they came near enough “Lady Malfoy, how are you on this fine summer day?” he bowed over her hand kissing the back of it.

With a smile Narcissa curtsied and accepted his greeting with grace. “I am quite well Lord Slytherin. How are you and your new son adjusting?” They fell into playful banter and Marvolo enjoyed the afternoon a lot. When Narcissa changed tables to stand by the other Ladies, from what he could see there were Lady Parkinson and Greengrass standing together eating cake, he was left alone with Lucius for a moment.

“My Lord,” Lucius was visibly nervous “my wife wanted me to thank you, for your orders. She…” trying not to chuckle Marvolo interrupted the other man. “No need to thank me. But maybe we should find a way to mend the difficulties between our families. Any ideas? No? Then you better start, see you later.”

Marvolo moved on to another table, another group of adults, to charm the ladies and terrify the men. He should go to more parties.

oooOOooo

While the grown ups were holding small talk near the pond, the young witches and wizards were sitting on a big blanket under a tree. Harry was glad over the shadow to sit in, as it was a really hot day. On the blanket there were plates and bowls with many different snacks and a jug with chilled pumpkin juice. More than a simple picnic, at least in Harry’s opinion.

At the moment none of the Slytherin students paid him any attention. Daphne, her younger sister
Astoria and Pansy were talking animatedly about some beauty charms mentioned in the last edition of teen witch monthly. A topic Harry did not want to comment on or, worse, be dragged into.

The boys, namely Vincent, Gregory, Draco, Blaise and Theodore, discussed the Slytherin Quidditch Team and the possible changes that would come this year. They were all looking forward to it, as they had missed the matches. One year of the Tri-Wizard-Tournament had been nice, but a year without Quidditch not so much.

Harry silently agreed that having Quidditch matches again was great. He disagreed with the sentiment the tournament had been nice, in his eyes the blasted event had been nothing other than awful.

Brooding, the black haired teen nibbled on some cherry pastries, sipping the pleasantly cool juice now and then. He was aware of the glances the others shoot his way and the strain his presence placed over the gathering. He did not care. His thoughts circled around his wish to sit here with Ron and his siblings, Hermione and maybe Neville. Instead he was forced to sit here with Malfoy, the git, and the others he did not really know. He felt a tad guilty that he had not known most of their first names, but showed this feeling aside ruthlessly. Not really hungry he started to shred his pastry, filling his plate with crumbs.

Finally, in a lull in their conversation, Draco decided that it was time to draw the Gryffindor out of his brooding.

“Tell us, scar-head, how does it feel being a Slytherin? We ought to show you the common room, now that you are something like an honorary Slytherin.” he grinned maybe trying to look friendly. But his expression changed quickly to confusion at the angry glare and clenched fists of the other teen.

They all paled at the angry, tight and quiet words they heard next.

“How it feels to be forced to live with the monster that killed my parents? Tried to kill me, more than once? How it feels to be dragged away from friends and family? That everything was changed without asking me?” breathing heavily Harry stood, glared at Draco and turned to Theodore, who sat next to Daphne with a worried frown. “I do not feel well, Theodore. I will go to my room.” briefly closing his eyes he added in a quiet voice “Sorry Theodore, enjoy your party.”

Before any of the others could react, Harry had stalked of, avoiding the adults, vanishing into the house.

ooOoo

“Well done Draco” Daphne said with a sarcastic tone. “You always were so good with delicate topics.”

Blushing, Draco started to defend himself. “How should I have known? To be heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin is an honour. Why would anyone react this dramatically?” Looking from one to the other, on a loss what they should do now, the teenagers stood awkwardly, as two of the adults came over to them.

The young Malfoy paled drastically, recognizing the Dark Lord, accompanied by Theo’s father, stalking towards their place in the shadow of the old tree.
“Is there a problem?” asked the elder Nott.

And as host of their party Theodore answered “Henry is not feeling well. He left to lay down in his room.”

Draco shifted nervously under the sceptical look of Lord Slytherin. He tried to not look guilty. But this was harder than he would like to admit.

“What have you said to my son, heir Malfoy?”

To his immense embarrassment Draco was not able to answer. After a moment the Dark Lord shifted his gaze away from Draco, who could then breath more freely, to the others, clearly expecting an answer. Seeing that the boys were trying to vanish in plain sight, Daphne straightened her light green silk robes over her emerald summer dress and took a step forward, drawing the Dark Lord’s attention to her.

“My Lord,” she curtsied “in our conversation the topic of his parents death came up. He was understandably upset.”

Henry’s adopted father pinched the bridge of his nose hissing something under his breath, no one understood. He turned to the other adult, excusing himself before walking off in direction of the house. Shortly after, Lord Nott, with a stern look to his son, left as well, leaving eight shaken teens behind.

“He is fucking scary.” Vincent said with feeling. And even though Daphne started to berate the boy for his language, Draco was sure they all thought the same. The Dark Lord was scary as hell.

On his way back to the house, Marvolo analysed the information he had been given. Obviously the Malfoy heir had said something insensitive, upsetting Henry enough to make him leave in anger. Both the Nott heir and the Greengrass heiress, were crafty enough to cover up the blunder. For all involved. His son’s rudeness and whatever the Malfoy boy had said to cause all this.

Marvolo did not wonder why this happened, it was bound to happen sooner rather than later. Now to find a way to smooth it over, or even get something useful out of it.

He passed Nagini sunbathing on a large patch of grass near the back doors.

.:What made your young one so angry?:. she inquired lazily.

.:My young one?:. he hissed in reply, surprised .:Why do you call him that?:.

.:Because he smells a little like you. Like family smells alike. Is he not yours?:.

Looking at his familiar pensively, Marvolo wondered over this new bit of information. He would not have expected the adoption to affect the boy’s scent. Maybe he would look deeper into this once he had a little spare time at his hands. He snorted at his own thoughts. The way things were developing it would be years before he had something even resembling spare time again.

.:In a way he is mine. He most certainly is family:. Marvolo reassured his large snake .:As to
what made him angry? I do not know exactly what happened. Only that there was a
disagreement of some kind, with the other young ones:.

Nagini lazily raised her head :I better go check on him then:. And without waiting for a reply
from Marvolo, she slithered to the door and into the house.

Briefly contemplating if that was a good idea or not, Marvolo got inside, heading for the study.
Once there, he reached for a small piece of parchment and his favourite quill to write down a short
note.

Henry,

I heard that you are not feeling well. I hope this will make you feel better. As it seems ignoring our
past is not working out well, I would propose a talk this evening.

Marvolo

“Flimm!” he called one of the Potter elves, which he had met the other day while checking over the
houses. With a soft pop the elf appeared before him clad in a crisp white pillowcase, bowing
deeply, but missing the happy expression Marvolo had come to connect with happy serving elves.

“What can Flimm be doing for yous Master?” Marvolo was aware that the Potter elves addressed
him only with the bare minimum of politeness, and he found it hard to blame them, after all he had
killed their last master.

“Bring this note and a tray with juice and ice cream to Henry’s room. He is not feeling well, and
can use some cheering up.”

Bowing low again and levitating the note to grab it, the elf vanished into thin air. Sure that he had
done what he could to show he cared – a great way to win someone over to your side – Marvolo
made his way back to the garden. He still had some followers to tease.

ooooOoooo

In his room Harry paced up and down, torn and with a feeling of unrest in his chest. He had
thought he was doing well, keeping calm, taking advantage as much as he could, and now here he
was, losing control, storming of from Theodore's party, embarrassing the other teen and likely
getting in trouble with Voldemort.

Frustrated he tossed a pillow from the bed, only to grab the others, one by one, and throwing them
with as much force as he could muster against the far wall. It was not as satisfying as throwing
something that could shatter, but better than pacing.

He almost jumped out of his shoes as he heard hissing from the door :What are you doing in
there young one?:. Harry heard a thud from the door, like something being was banged against it.
:Are you well? Speak with me, I know you can understand me:. 
“Leave me alone!” he shouted, dropping onto the bed staring at the canopy.

.:Do not be rude, young one. You seemed angry, you did not even see me. You can tell me what is wrong, maybe I can help you hunt down whatever angered you:.:

Huffing in frustration, Harry tried to picture a snake .:Just leave me alone. I do not want to talk:.:

He heard something like leather sliding over carpet .:You do not need to talk. I can talk for both of us:.:

And with this she, he was pretty sure the snake was female, started on a long and detailed description of her day. After only a few minutes Harry wished the snake would leave. And he got another shock as a house elf suddenly appeared with a floating tray beside it.

“Master Potter sir! I has juice and ice cream. Most not stay unhappy on such a fine day!” the tray was placed on the desk and the small green being bowed so low, that its nose touched the expensive rug. “If Master wants anything, just calls Flimm, and Flimm will comes.”

.:What is in there with you, young one?:.

Rubbing his temples, there was a headache on its way, Harry nodded to Flimm, comparing the elf to the other ones he had met so far. In comparison this elf appeared rather collected. “Thank you Flimm, I will remember.” with another bow the elf vanished.

Now to the nuisance in the hall. .:Will you stop talking all the time, if I let you in?:.

There was a moment of silence and then a soft hiss .:I will:.:

Harry got up and opened the door. In slithered an enormous mostly green snake. She went for a place under a window, where the sun was shining in, and curled up. .:You have a nice warm spot here:. and with this she stayed silent for a while.

Grateful for small mercies, Harry closed the door again and went to the tray, to retrieve the ice cream. He found a note under the bowl and flicked it open. After reading the note, Harry sat down on the windowsill, starting to eat the still cold ice cream. Wonderful, a talk with Voldemort, about their past. He could imagine many things that he rather would do. But he probably had no real choice.

Chapter End Notes

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Not yet beta-ed
Finally all the guests had left, and Theodore slipped out of his robes, opening the topmost buttons of his shirt. The party had not been such a catastrophe as he had feared it would become, after the scene between Draco and Henry. At first it had been awkward, but soon they had fallen into familiar patterns. They even managed a game of pick-up Quidditch.

All in all, it had been a nice enough afternoon.

He glanced over to his father and the Dark Lord, talking while they stood next to the floo, where they had seen off the last guests. As the Dark Lord turned and went to the stairs up to the bedrooms, Theodore took a deep breath and walked over to talk to his father. He just had to know if Henry was in trouble.

The other boy had been staying at Nott House for only a few days now, but Theodore had started to like him. He liked the openness he showed once he started speaking, the fearlessness he had to make biting comments about the Dark Lord, while he showed the common sense to make them out of earshot of the man. He was almost certain they could be friends in time. Well, he hoped they could at least. “Father?”

As he heard his son, Benjamin Nott turned to face the teen. Smiling, he said, “Theo! How did you like your party?”

Theo smiled back, but it was a weak one.

“What's wrong, son?”

“I don't think it was a good idea to invite Henry to my party.”

With sudden understanding of what bothered his son, Benjamin laid a hand on the boy’s shoulder, guiding him over to the seating area, directing him to sit down on the plush, sky-blue love seat.

“If you had not invited him, Marvolo would have insisted he come regardless,” the older Nott assured the worried teen.

“But it was a disaster!” Theodore frowned, looking at his father.

“It was a controlled setting.” Theodore’s frown deepened, “One of these days he had to interact with your friends, their parents. Your party was relatively safe ground. Only people loyal to the Dark Lord were in attendance. Whatever was to happen would stay here.” The man’s voice was kind as he explained the reasoning to his son.
Looking down on the folded hands in his lap, Theodore was lost in thought. Not happy with the Dark Lord’s reasoning, and probably his father’s as well. Benjamin observed his son thinking, and started to explain some more. “The party at Malfoy Manor is coming up, as you know. Lord Slytherin, and his son, will be invited, as will be the Minister and several other, not entirely friendly, nobles and officials. It was better to have the first encounter with your schoolmates here.” A little worry made its way into the father’s voice. “It didn't ruin your party, did it? I wouldn't want you to suffer due to petty politics.”

With a more real smile and a reassuring pat to his father’s arm, Theo shook his head. “It was fine, father. I would wish it had gone more smoothly, but I had fun.”

Relief clear in his eyes, Benjamin stood, patting his son on the shoulder. “Go to bed, son. And don’t worry, Henry isn't in trouble.”

Nodding, though he was not entirely convinced, Theo stood, giving his father a quick one-armed hug, before vanishing up the stairs to his room. He would have to see how Henry was the next day at breakfast, before he would believe that the Dark Lord had no intention of hurting his adoptive son. The warning his father had given him, the day the dark wizard had come to stay at their home, still ringing in his ear.

oooOOooo

Marvolo stood in front of the door of Henry’s room, hearing hissing from inside. It seemed his son was telling Nagini a story about a visit to the zoo and the first time he had spoken to a snake. He took a deep breath, a last time going over his plan for this conversation and his Occlumency shields to control his temper. It would do him no good to lose it and scare his son.

He took the last step to the door, knocking with enough force to be heard and not appear timid, but not too much, so he would not make an aggressive entry.

“Come in,” he heard the voice of Henry from inside. Laced with many feelings. A little anger, apprehension for what was to come, worry, and stubbornness. Marvolo could not make one wrong move, he was aware that this would be a crucial point in his relationship with his adopted son. The moment it would be decided if there was to be a chance for trust between them, ever.

He opened the door and stepped inside. His gaze fell on Henry and Nagini curled up on the bed, looking comfortable. But as soon as he was inside, Henry made an attempt to stand up from the bed, hindered by Nagini sliding over his legs, to keep him seated. :Do not go! Summer evenings are cold, I like your warmth close:. Marvolo had to chuckle at that. Nagini was a truly unique serpent, he never had met one as demanding or witty. “Stay seated, Henry. No need to get up, we are in your room, after all.” Warily the boy complied and Marvolo turned the chair from the desk to face the bed, sitting down with a sigh. Standing up the whole afternoon made his feet happy to finally sit again.

He wiggled his feet, sighing again, before placing them parallel on the floor.

“I was told you did not feel well. Are you better now?”
A low growl came from the bed. “What has the git told you?” And as an afterthought, “Sir?” Marvolo had to suppress a smile, here he was again, the boy that had stood against the monster that had killed his parents. He was glad that Henry had finally found his footing, finding secure ground. Enough to oppose his new guardian.

“Draco Malfoy told me nothing. Theodore said you did not feel well, and heiress Greengrass said that your parent’s death came up in conversation. A reasonable explanation why you would not feel well out of the blue. They didn’t tell exactly what happened. But I can guess that the younger Malfoy said something to upset you.”

If looks could kill, he would have to find a new body by now. “What did you want to do, after the other said, what he said?” Marvolo asked a little awkwardly, but it got the point across.

“I wanted to punch him. Hard. On the nose.” The teenager was visibly angry now. If Nagini had not had him pinned to the bed because she was laying across his legs, he most likely would have jumped to his feet by now.

“And what have you done instead?” He himself kept his voice calm, it was more a challenge to keep his amusement out of it than anything, looking for the smallest indicators that he needed to change his approach. This was not a laughing matter. Too much was at stake, he had to remember this. Even if it was highly amusing that there was a boy of not yet fifteen sitting on a bed, pinned there by his large familiar, clearly not cowed by fear, like so many grown wizards he had met through the years.

“I walked away,” came the almost hissed reply.

Nodding in approval, Marvolo smiled a proud smile. “And this was the sensible thing to do. Well done, Henry.”

With wide eyes and an open mouth, said teen stared at the man with the many-shaded red eyes, not processing what had been said.

Continuing with the same voice, calm, slightly proud, explaining, Marvolo added “Before we go to the next party, we should go over topics that will most likely come up, and ways you can deflect them, if you do not want to speak about something. But if in doubt, moving away is always better than attacking.” Irritated at the confusion he suddenly felt, he moved on to the next topic. Not waiting for Henry to get back his wits. No need to give him too much time to come to his senses. He did not want to risk a shouting match he could not take part in. Not and refrain from scaring the boy because he behaved too much like Voldemort again.

“Before we talk about our past, I want to inform you that I received mail from the Ministry today.” Perking up, Henry gently moved Nagini’s coils from his legs. At her protesting and sleepy .:.No. It’s so much warmer on your legs:. He answered with a small smile.

:.I do not feel my legs properly anymore. I need to get up and move a bit:. At Nagini’s huffed reply .:.I do not need legs, I think you do not need them either:. Marvolo chuckled again

:.Let him get up, love. Wizards do not slither over the ground:. Reluctantly Nagini moved, allowing Henry to get up. Which he did, slowly, so as not to rest too much weight on his sleeping feet too soon.
“The trial for your godfather will be held next Monday. Madame Bones has requested I come as witness. I think she just asked me so I will not be one of those voting. But I do not know exactly why she does not want me to be one of the judges.”

The boy listened with wary attention. Eager for every bit of information he could get, but worried that it might not be trustworthy. Getting the letter from a pocket in his robe, he levitated it over to the boy standing by the bed, only in trousers and shirt. Obviously he had discarded his robe some time ago.

“Do you want to come?” Not assuming anything, letting the boy make the decisions whenever possible. His son never had any measure of control over his own life. He could still remember how he had felt, when he was young, forced by Dippet and Dumbledore to return to the orphanage every summer. He took the control on every other aspect of his life as soon as he could. Better to give it to his son, than have him take it by force.

With flaring temper Henry returned, “Of course I want to come! How can you even ask, Sir!”

“I did not assume that you did not want to come. But I did not want to assume you would either.” He shrugged, “It is your decision. But I am happy that you want to come. I think you should sit in the Potter seat. Observe the Wizengamot working.”

The boy nodded, hesitant, and started to pace, only to stop next to the window, looking out over the garden.

Marvolo briefly looked at his hands, then up again. “Before I try to explain why I did what I did in the past, I want you to tell me what you think are my intentions for adopting you.”

Throwing him an incredulous look, Henry sat on the windowsill, frowning. “You need an heir to claim the title of Lord Slytherin, and you need the title to gain your goals.” The frown deepened. “Which I know nothing about.” The teenager's voice became more agitated with each word he spoke, jumping up from his seat, pacing over the carpet with the floral pattern. “So you want me alive, healthy and, well, maybe even happy. But what if you get married, have children of your own? I’m replaceable. Not really important in the long run, only now.” At the end he was panting staring at the older wizard with fire in his eyes.

Slowly nodding Marvolo met those fire-green eyes with his calm red ones. “I am thinking about marrying.” He held up a hand to stall Henry’s desire to yell at him. “But even if I find a woman who I can persuade to marry me. Even if we manage to have a child. Even if the child is a boy and turns out to be a parsleemouth. Even if all this was going to happen, you,” he pointed his finger at Henry, “would still be my oldest child and heir.”

The teenager only snorted at this, clearly not buying a word. “I will make a vow if you need it to believe me.” And he would do it. Marvolo did not believe that he would find someone better to be his heir than the boy now standing before him. Calculating, defiant, and resourceful. He needed to gain some measure of trust from the teenager. All his plans would be so much easier to achieve if he had the wizarding world’s hero on his side.

Boxing one of the pillows from the window seat, the boy slumped back against another, narrowed his eyes with suspicion, changing the direction of their conversation. “You did not want to talk about the future, but the past.”

“You are right.” Marvolo sighed again, this would be not easy, but he had not thought it would be. “When I was young, a little older then you are now, I started some extracurricular reading. I was interested in all magic, not only what was in our teachers’ lesson plans.” He was watched closely
and highly aware of the fact. Nagini meanwhile started to snore lightly, not at all affected by the tension between the two humans in the room.

“I roamed the restricted section and found many books that have been removed since then.” The next part he did not like at all, but it was important to stand by his errors, by his weaknesses. If he could not share them with his own son – to gain some trust – he could just give up on his plans for the future.

“I found rituals and old spells to gain power, to gain immortality. And in the arrogance of youth, I undertook them, not heeding the consequences.” He took a deep breath, closing his eyes, leaning back in the chair. “It was perhaps my biggest mistake, or at least in the top five of them, and cost me large parts of myself. I lost my sanity, my ability to weigh consequences against gain and focus to stay on track to my goals.” Marvolo opened his eyes again and saw emerald green eyes fixed on him, listening with great attention, searching for a lie.

“I told the Minister I came across a cursed object, and fell under its influence. And this is the story all outside this room should believe.” He gave the boy a pointed look, met with a surprised one from across the room. “But it was my own stupidity that led to my most cruel and pointless actions.”

He made a small pause, conjuring himself a glass of water – speaking so much made his mouth dry – and ignoring the subtle flinch from his son as he got his wand from its holster.

“I was in my prime, concerning influence and the number of people fearing me. But at a low when it came to my ability to think, to plan, and my strength in magic. I was not aware of this fact – then – but I have realized in these last weeks just how much I had cost myself with my actions.”

He leant forward in his chair, placing his arms on his knees, looking to the floor, trying to make it clear that he wasn’t trying to hide anything, that he was being as open as he could be. “During this time, there was a prophecy spoken. One of my Death Eaters heard the first part of it, before he was spotted and thrown from the place. He wanted to gain favour with me, desperate for recognition, as he had been bullied his entire school life, ignored by many, and treated harshly by his family. So he came before me, not really believing in divination, but sure that I would have wanted to know, and told me what little he had heard.”

Marvolo carded both hands through his hair, tangling the loose locks. “Maybe that was my biggest mistake, definitively another of the top five. I acted upon a half-heard prophecy.” This was a lot harder than he had thought, acting for the Minister and the Wizengamot had been a walk in the park compared to being honest with his son. “You see, the prophecy spoke of a threat to me, something I could not ignore in the state my sanity was in.”

Not longer able to hold his question in, Henry interrupted him, almost shouting. “What has this all to do with me?!?”

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...” giving the boy a look full of meaning, he answered the question. “That was what I was told. And instantly I started to look for the threat, the one able to foil all my plans. I decided to wait, as there were more than one couple that had defied me three times. I could not be sure if it had to be exactly three times, or what form the defiance had to take...” He trailed of f, huffing frustrated ly. “Divination and prophecies are ambiguous at best. But at that moment I was insane and paranoid. And as the birth announcements at the beginning of August spoke of two boys born on the last days of July, I decided to go after one of them.”

“Me, you tried to kill me.” Horrified, wide eyes, filled with tears, locked with tired red ones.
Continuing, before the anger could get a hold of the boy, Marvolo nodded. “Yes, I went after you. I know now that my plan to go after the Potters and me telling my followers, sent one of mine to be a spy, to warn Dumbledore and your parents, and sent you all into hiding.” He picked some imaginary lint from his trousers. “I was incredibly frustrated when I could not find you, and elated when Peter finally came to me, so proud of himself, telling me he could hand me the Potters.” He shook his head, closed his eyes, tired and weary.

Now to drive home Dumbledore’s shortcomings. Redirect the anger to a different target, at least partially.

“So the Headmaster did not tell you of the prophecy?” he asked with real interest obvious in his voice. He did not understand why the old man left this many doors open for him to waltz through and steal the boy away.

“No, he didn’t,” the teenager said, his voice sounding as if coming from far away, his eyes not looking at any specific point. “But I asked him, asked him why Voldemort attacked us, killed my parents, tried to kill me. He said I was too young to know, that he would tell me in time.”

Quite suddenly Marvolo felt rage. And was instantly puzzled. That was not his emotion. He didn’t have much time to contemplate the oddity, as Henry stood and punched the wall with a horrifying crunching sound. Jumping up in alarm, Marvolo wanted to hurry to the teen’s side, assessing the damage, but he stayed where he was, wary what the boy would do if he should come only one step closer.

Whirling to face Marvolo, Henry cradled his hand to his chest, fury-filled eyes locked on the grown wizard. “Why? Why?” The cry was more a universal question for why me? why them? directed at the universe, and not a question Marvolo could have answered. He tried anyway.

“I know that there are no words to change anything that happened in the past. But when you destroyed my diary, you undid some of the rituals costing me my sanity. You gave me back what I had thrown away out of arrogance and fear. I am different now from the man that came to your house that night. It changes nothing, I know. But you deserve to know, to make your own choices based on facts and not on lies, assumptions, or guesses.”

With a frustrated roar, Henry started to punch the wall, and Marvolo took the last steps to the boy, a little afraid the boy would do serious harm to himself. To prevent this, he yanked the teen back, turning him away from the wall, making himself the target for the blows. And while he felt small hard fists raining down on his chest, he realized with horror that the bottomless fury he felt was indeed not his own, but that of the boy in his arms. Not able to think about it at the moment, he concentrated on keeping the boy from harming himself further.

After several minutes the fury ran dry, giving way to silent, exhausted tears. Carefully Marvolo guided the boy over to his bed, sitting him down, dropping to his knees in front of the teen, to inspect the hand that he thought most likely broken. He expected Henry to resist, take his hand away, punch him again, or at least shove him away. He did not expect the quiet questions that followed, and that he answered, honestly. Even if he sometimes left out parts.

“Why tell me?” the boy’s voice was raspy.

“I think you should know. And even though I think I probably should just forget about it and act without taking this prophecy into account, you may decide otherwise. I know that it is hard to disregard something you know. But knowing there is something maybe important and not having it is equally difficult.”
“Is there a way to get the whole thing?”

Here he nodded, carefully checking the hand to see if there were broken bones. “Yes. You could ask the Headmaster again. He was the one witnessing as it was made. Or we could go to the Ministry. There is a hall in which copies of all prophecies made are stored.”

“What are your goals? You still haven’t said.” The boy was right, he had not, and even now he would stick to the basics, no need to overcomplicate things at this point. “I want to make sure that no magical child will ever again be treated like I was, like Severus was, like you were. No Muggle should harm one of us. And I want to increase our numbers, we cannot risk dying out. We are severely outnumbered as it is.”

Yes, the hand was broken. He needed to call Henry’s healer. The boy’s next question, asked with eyes firmly fixed on the hands of them both, startled Marvolo into silence for a moment.

“Why did you tell my mum to step out of the way?”

“How do you know?” Marvolo questioned back.

“It It's what I hear whenever I'm near Dementors.” Deciding not to ask when the boy had come near Dementors, the red-eyed wizard briefly contemplated his answer, it would probably be the best to tell the truth. “Severus asked me to spare her. He begged, actually. And as I was happy with his work, I tried. I believe they were friends in school.”

The laughter started small and almost inaudible. But soon it was loud, punctuated by sobs, and hysterical. Henry bent over his hands, tears falling from his eyes, shaken by his violent crying.

Marvolo was out of his depth, he had never had to deal with hysterical people in a kind fashion. He had seen many, victims of torture, by his wand or by the hands of one of his followers. But never had he been present when one was in need of comfort, when he was the only one present who could be expected to offer it. So what to do?

And then he felt hysteria rise in himself. But he was not hysterical, he was confused, a little angry, but nothing ever had sent him into hysterics. As realization finally hit him like a bludger, red eyes widened. He called for Toppys, sending the elf for a dose of calming draught. And then turned to his sobbing son. He was feeling the boy’s emotions. The fear, the frustration, and now the hysteria. There was a connection between them, and Marvolo could only think of one time that such a connection could have been formed. And if he was right, he had another complication at his hands.

Had Dumbledore known? Henry surely had told the man about the diary. And he had known that Marvolo was not truly gone. So he must have suspected what Marvolo had used to gain immortality. Had he guessed what this connection was? Was he even aware of its existence?

He was brought out of his musings by Toppys bringing the potion. He took the small vial, nodding in thanks, and turned to Henry, still clutching his head and sobbing. “Henry, come son, sit up. You need to drink this potion. You need to calm down, you will harm yourself.” It took some time, but finally he calmed the boy down enough, with kind words and a carefully schooled voice, to get him to drink the potion and then lie down against the pillows.

“I hate you.” It was said without heat, without the emotion behind it. But it was the truth. Of that Marvolo was sure. “I know. And I understand.” He gently removed the boy’s shoes, setting them aside, proceeding to spread a comforter over him, to keep him warm. “But I hope we can find a way to work together, for both our benefit.” To this there was no visible reaction. But as the teen’s
eyes were following him still, he thought it was probably prudent to ask now. “Have you had odd emotions, lately? Some that did not match your situation or what you had felt moments before?” Trying to think of more ways to phrase it, Marvolo was stopped by the slightly surprised look in emerald green eyes. “So it goes both ways?”

“You know of the connection between our minds?” That he had not anticipated. If Henry knew, it would be a miracle if Dumbledore did not.

“Of course I do. My scar always reacted when I was near you. Last year I dreamt of places I had never seen.” A little bit of life returned to Henry. “What is this link? Do you know?”

“I do not know. Not yet. Maybe I have an idea what it could be. But I do not want to speak of it without proof.”

Nodding his head, his adopted son gave his agreement.

“I will send for Healer Greengrass, to see to your hand. I think it is broken.”

As Marvolo stood, Nagini lifted her head. :What did I miss? Why are you smelling like that? Like a running rabbit:.

Shaking his head at his sleepy, confused familiar, Marvolo hissed to her, :Keep my young one company. He does not need to be alone at the moment:. And not waiting for a reply, he moved out of the room to make a floo call. Best to go about this in a more conventional way. It would not do for the healer to appear in Death Eater robes at his friend’s house.

He had the solution to his worries about his tumultuous emotions. But with the answer came a pack of other worries. Did Dumbledore know about his horcruxes? Where they still safe? If he knew about them, was he searching for them? Did he know that the Boy-Who-Lived was maybe one of them? And if the old meddler did know, what was his plan? As far as Marvolo knew, there was only one way to destroy a horcrux that could be done by someone other than the maker. Destroying the vessel. If he could prove that Dumbledore knew and planned to kill Henry, it could be the wedge he needed to get Henry away from Dumbledore’s side for good.

oooOoooo

In his book-lined sitting room at Spinner's End, Severus was sitting by the only window, a gentle breeze moving his freshly washed, silken hair. After the tutoring session for Lily’s son and the short talk with his Lord afterwards, he had come to his house – he would not call it home – carrying texts for his next two projects.

He was immensely relieved. That he was still alive, that his Lord still included him in his plans, that the boy was safe. And he was glad that he did not have to wait for the ultimatum to run out to find peace again.

The texts he had been given, translations by the Dark Lord’s own hands, held information about two intricate brews, both still more on the experimental side, as far as he could tell. He had been ordered to complete them. He loved a challenge, and these two potions would surely fit that
description.

One potion was intended to put a veil over past memories, dulling them, almost disconnecting the person drinking it, from the memories' emotions. He had not been told for what purpose the Dark Lord wanted to use this. But Severus saw applications for young victims of trauma, too deep to be overcome through different means.

The application of the other, though, was much more obvious. From the notes, the young Potions Master gathered that Salazar Slytherin had tried to help one of his sons, and the man this son had loved, to have children of their own.

He had succeeded in combining the family traits of both men, but the success to actually get a child varied. Taking a dose of the potion only resulted in pregnancy half of the time. And only one child had been born during his tests, dying soon after.

Clearly this potion needed more work. Thinking about the discoveries muggle scientists had made in the field of human reproduction, Severus saw several ways to improve the potion and its likely success.

For one there was the timing, that should probably be adjusted to the cycle of the surrogate mother. Then there was the matter of what to use from both parents to be, to get their genes. Salazar Slytherin had used blood and hair from his son and his partner. But Severus scribbled down a note that it would be worth a try to use other body fluids. It should work for two fathers, at least. And maybe drinking it was not the best way to administer the dose.

Happily scribbling away his notes and ideas, Severus hummed a tuneless melody.

If he found a way to keep the Headmaster off his back, his life would be much happier than it had been in a long time. Whatever had given the Dark Lord back his sanity, he was grateful for it.

Harry was staring at the door to his room, only listening with one ear to Healer Greengrass’ explanation of what he would do to heal Harry’s broken right hand.

He was thinking. The talk with Voldemort had brought up some interesting new points. And he was totally at a loss as to what to think about them.

So there had been a prophecy the Headmaster knew of. Why the man had not told Harry after the events involving the philosopher's stone, the teen thought he understood. He had been only eleven, after all. But that he had not spoken of the implications of a prophecy, maybe predicting that he would be the one to stop Voldemort, after said man was back again, that he could not understand. Even he, at fourteen years old, could see that he would be a prime target, and that this information could be used against him. He was aware of his curiosity and his need to get to the bottom of a mystery. And he had thought that Dumbledore had realized this some time ago.

If the old wizard had only mentioned the existence of this prophecy, Harry would have been happier. Naturally he would have liked to know the entire text, but not knowing of its existence at all... that was just unacceptable.
That Voldemort had told him added insult to injury. Harry was aware that Voldemort was using his hunger for information, and Dumbledore’s tendency to keep secrets close, to sway the teen to his side. And even while still unsure if all he was told was true, Harry was pretty secure in his assessment of the situation.

There was a prophecy. Voldemort knew parts of it and had acted, at least partially, on this knowledge when he had gone to kill Harry. It was evident that the man that he had seen these last days was not the same man that had climbed out of the cauldron in the graveyard. He was not going to get away from the man, because he really was connected to him by blood. And not only the blood that Wormtail had stolen from him after the third task.

Only barely aware of the tingling sensation in his hand as his healer cast the spell to mend the broken bones, Harry noted the door opening. Voldemort stepped in, carefully watching the teen for further signs of emotional turmoil. If he could blush at the moment, Harry would have. He had truly broken down after hearing of the prophecy, and on top of that, learning that Snape and his mother had been friends. Friends! He still had trouble accepting that concept. Not many people had told him things about his mother. Mostly he got to hear that he had her eyes and that she was quite bright. Aunt Petunia never even mentioned her sister’s name. And now he learned, after years of knowing the man, that Professor Severus Snape had been a good friend of his mother's in school.

It had simply been too much. And without the calming potion Voldemort had made him drink, he probably would be freaking out still. He could not quite believe that he had punched the man, and was still sitting up in his bed and not writhing on the floor under some painful curse.

While Healer Greengrass spoke to Voldemort about his findings in the hand which had made contact with the rather solid wall, Harry tried to decide what he should do now. Voldemort had been forthcoming with information, and he had acted civilly. He had to admit that he had behaved more civil, than the Dursleys ever had.

Dumbledore had seemingly kept information from him, beginning with his standing in the wizarding world as heir to a Noble House and his coming responsibilities, and not stopping at the existence of a prophecy.

If he only took this knowledge and disregarded everything Voldemort had done before he had lost his body. There were only a few things left that he could not really dismiss. The slain unicorns and the attempts on his life in his first year, and Cedric’s death. Not things he could forgive. But after the man was a man again, and no longer a bodiless spirit, he had acted almost normal, as far as Harry knew.

It was so incredibly hard. Part of him wanted to keep hating the man, to stop eating in protest, to rant and fight and sulk. And part of him wanted to use the opportunities presented, to learn, to gain someone that cared about his studies, asked about his homework, gave him tutors, clothes, regular meals, and medical attention.

Why had he been placed in this spot, without a way to decide what to do, without his friends to talk to, to ask what they thought of all this.

Healer Greengrass left, with some words to Harry that the teen never really heard or even registered, still staring at the wall opposite from his bed. The door clunked shut, and Voldemort once more took the chair from the desk and sat down in it, facing Harry’s bed.

The man was gathering his thoughts, maybe trying to decide where to start, but the green-eyed teen did not wait for the older wizard to start the conversation. “I want to meet my friends.” It came out rather flat, not with the determination Harry had wished to express, he was still heavily affected by
the calming draught.

Regarding him thoughtfully, Voldemort nodded his head. “I think we can incorporate a meeting with your friends into my plans for tomorrow.” The man nodded again. “In the morning I want us to visit the houses, so you can choose which you would like to live in. After that, I have several job interviews planned in Diagon Alley. I cannot invite them into a friend’s house, after all. You can accompany me and meet your friends at the ice cream parlour?”

Harry felt himself nodding to the suggestion, and scowled a bit. He really wanted to disagree with everything the man said, but it was damn hard to do so when he sounded so reasonable. “Yeah, I would like that.”

“I will send letters after we are finished here. Whom do you want to invite?”

Frowning a bit, Harry contemplated the question. Who did he want to see? Ron and Hermione he was missing the most. So he wanted to see them. But could he invite Hermione? Or would he put her in danger, if he asked her to come?

“What do you plan to do about muggle-borns?” Harry asked without explanation of why he wanted to know now.

But it seemed the dark wizard did not need an explanation, he did not look surprised at all. “The so-called ‘muggle-born’ witches and wizards are quite safe from me now. As your ancestry test has shown, the beliefs about their origins are not true. And as we are so few as it is, I do not want to kill them, but encourage them to become part of our world in full.”

Vows and oaths to guarantee the truth behind spoken words came to mind, but Harry was not sure if he wanted to bring up this topic. And he had heard the oath Voldemort had made as he had claimed the title of Lord Slytherin. Best for the magical community. Sadly, best was a not well-defined concept. What he thought best could vary greatly from what Voldemort thought best. But still, in Diagon Alley, what could he do there in front of so many witnesses?

“I want to invite Hermione –Granger – and the Weasleys.” Remembering it might be wise to stay polite he added, “Sir,” a little later.

“Very well, we will see if they have time tomorrow afternoon.” Absent-mindedly stroking Nagini, who had slithered up to the man during their short talk, Voldemort asked a half-question. “You said your scar reacted in my presence. In what way? And how has it acted since I adopted you?”

Rubbing at said scar with the newly healed hand, Harry tried to work through his drugged state. “It tingled or burned. I’ve felt happiness, mostly, the last days.” He was getting quite tired by now. “I want to test my theory about this connection tomorrow evening. The sooner we know for sure what it is, the sooner we can work to find a way to block or break it. I do not like experiencing foreign emotions without warning, and I would guess you feel the same?”

Nodding, Harry yawned and asked, blinking a bit slowly to clear his bleary sight. “How will you test your theory?” and after another yawn, “Sir?”

“There is a ritual to test it. This is the only way,” he added as Harry looked alarmed by the prospect. “And it neither involves blood, nor pain, or any things considered dark by the Ministry.” Smiling slightly Voldemort suggested, “You should go to sleep, we can discuss it in more detail tomorrow. I will go write the invitations and send them by elf. Sleep well, Henry.”
Moments later Voldemort was gone, and Harry stumbled into his bathroom to get ready for bed. He hoped meeting with his friends again, without Voldemort there to monitor his talk with them, would help him find his way back to hating the man, without doubts.

Lucius was sitting in his study, a tumbler of firewhiskey in his hand, rubbing his temples. Draco’s stupidity knew no bounds, it seemed. In one afternoon the boy had ruined his father’s work to be top of the Dark Lord’s advisers. If he could not find a way to mend the damage done, he might end up somewhere down with the likes of Wormtail. He shuddered at the thought.

He had given Draco quite a lecture after they had returned home. And an essay to write about what he had said, why it had been unwise to say it, what he could have said instead, and how he intended to repair the damage done during the garden party they would have at Malfoy Manor in a few days' time.

If this did n’t help, he might need to get his father’s cane out of its spot deep in the cupboard with the cleaning materials. He had placed it there after Draco had been born, never wanting to use it on his son, as his father had used it on him. But if his son insisted on provoking the Dark Lord, it might save the boy’s life if he used the cane to get his point across.

He was brought out of his musings by an elf announcing the arrival of the Dark Lord, and he stood, wondering what could have brought the man here, this late at night.

He bowed deeply as his Lord strode into the study, still in the clothes he had worn to Theodore Nott’s party.

“I need to borrow your ritual room, Lucius. Make sure that it is ready by tomorrow evening.”

Puzzled by this sudden request, the blond Lord bowed his head, hair falling forward into his eyes. “Should I prepare the room for anything in particular?”
“‘No need, Lucius, I will bring everything I need.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
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Friends

Chapter Notes

Yesterday I added chapter 48 to the story over at FFnet. At the moment I'm at the chapters not yet reviewed (betaed) before, so they take more time to go through before I can add them here. As soon as I reach chapter 17 that problem should be solved, and I hopefully will manage to add the remaining chapters at a greater speed.
Have fun reading and leave a comment. Writers run on feedback!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Walking into the still not entirely clean kitchen, Sirius found a stack of letters next to his plate. He sat down and began to methodically work through them.

One letter was from his solicitor, Bench & Bench. Probably with more details for the trial to be held on the day after tomorrow. Sirius laid it aside to shuffle through the rest. Another letter was from Gringotts, a rather thick one, another from his cousin Narcissa – he would recognize her handwriting any time – several were from tailors: Twilfitt and Tattings as well as Madam Malkin's, to name a few, probably offering their services to make him robes for Monday. One letter was from the Daily Prophet. He was not looking forward to reading that one. There was one from Dumbledore, but as he knew what would be written inside, he just placed it on the same stack as the others he would read later... probably.

He stopped short as his eyes fell on the coat of arms of the Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin. Why would he write him? The letter Harry had sent had been sealed only with a blob of wax, nothing more. So this had to be from You-Know-Who.

The wizard with messy black hair and beard stubble was still staring at the unopened letter in his hand as Hermione and Ron came through the door into the kitchen, bickering.

"'Mione, you need to take a break. All the time, you're in the library, nose in a book. You should do something different for a change. Like, play exploding snap with me, or something."

The bushy-haired witch huffed in frustration. "Ron! I can't just leave Harry hanging! If you're bored, you could always help me find a way to free our friend!"

She stopped abruptly, poking the red-head in the chest with a finger. "He's your friend, too. Or have you already forgotten?"

Shaking his head with a look of worry, Ron walked past Hermione to his usual seat at the table, falling gracelessly into his chair, grabbing the pot of tea. With narrowed eyes, Hermione followed, clearing the way for the other Weasley children, as well as Molly and Arthur. They all settled around the table, chatting and filling their plates with the wonderful-smelling food that Molly had prepared before going to fetch her family.

Only when Arthur finally started to relay the Ministry gossip about his impending trial to Sirius, did they notice him staring at the letter in his hands.
“What's wrong with the letter, Sirius?” asked Arthur, a little concerned.

Startled out of his thoughts, Sirius looked up and after blinking a few times, swiftly broke the seal. Flipping the letter open with a flick of his wrist, he started to read without explaining to the others.

In polite words, Lord Slytherin informed Lord Black that his godson would be in Diagon Alley this afternoon, meeting his friends, if they had time. The letter did not mention that Sirius might want to come as well, but the animagus got the impression that exactly this was somehow written between the lines.

After this bit of information, Lord Slytherin only mentioned that he would be called as witness at the trial on Monday and that Harry, who was called Henry in the letter, would be there too.

Switching his concentration back to the kitchen, Sirius became aware of the silence in the room. All of the teens had gotten letters they were now staring at, just like Sirius had done only moments before.

“Did You-Know-Who write you, too?” Sirius’ voice was a little unsteady, and he was not surprised to get four nods in response.

“Open them. It’s probably an invitation for this afternoon. It was mentioned in my letter that Harry’s friends would get one,” the young Lord Black encouraged his guests, holding his own letter up.

Hermione was the first to open hers, closely followed by the twins. And they all were almost finished reading before Ron even blinked again.

Her hands with the letter sinking down to the table, Hermione waited for Fred and George to finish theirs. They all wore similar looks of confusion. “You were invited too, Hermione?” asked the twin on the right. “For ice cream in Diagon Alley?” added the twin on the left.

Nodding slowly, Hermione read the letter a second time. And without looking up, words started to hurry out of the young witch's mouth.

“It’s odd that he would write the invitation and not Harry. Don’t you think? He writes something about a long day. But why would a long day stop Harry from writing? I hope he is not ill or something like that. No. If he was, he wouldn't be able to go out for ice cream. Should we go? Maybe he will be there, even if it says here that he has appointments this afternoon. But even if, we can’t let Harry down, can we?”

Suddenly her rambling stopped, her eyes getting wide, her brow furrowed. “How did the letters get here? Sirius, are the wards still in place?”

Glad that something had stopped the fast flow of words – seriously, did the girl not need to breath? – Sirius shook his head and smiled. “No need to worry. How do you think all this,” he indicated the huge stack of parchment beside his plate, “could be here, if the excessive wards Albus put in place were still in effect? No, I changed them a bit after the Headmaster's dubious decisions.”

The torn thoughts of the young witch over the Headmaster and all that had happened were clear on her face for Sirius to read, but it was not his job to make up her mind about the things that were happening. He needed to concentrate on clearing his name and supporting his godson. There was no room for anything else at the moment.

So, back to the matter at hand. “Do you want to go? We shouldn't let you go alone.”
Arthur and Molly looked worriedly at their sons. Ginny was staying with her aunt Muriel for a few days.

“I’m afraid I have to go to work,” Arthur said regretfully.

“But it's Saturday!” Molly interrupted her husband.

Before they could get any further into this topic, the door to the kitchen opened and Remus came in, freshly shaven and clearly confused by the tension in the room. The werewolf looked from one to the other, trying to get a feeling for what was happening. Sirius had seen this often enough to recognize what was happening, and helped his friend by explaining.

“We got letters from *Lord Slytherin*,” he said, the title thick with sarcasm.

“Letters? Like this one?” asked Remus, getting a letter of his own out of his robe pocket, showing the green wax of the seal to the others.

“Exactly,” nodded Sirius. “Were you invited for ice cream, like the teens?”

“It's an invitation, but for the job interview. The one for the History tutor position. It came yesterday morning.”

Glad for his friend, and for the opportunity this position presented for them, Sirius smiled, briefly wondering why Remus had not told him yesterday. But his irritation quickly vanished, as he thought back to the previous day.

He had been in meetings with his solicitor most of the morning and great parts of the afternoon. And while he had not been in a meeting, Remus had been off working in his current job as a help in a muggle library.

“When and where will this interview be?”

“Today. In the afternoon. The letter says to come to the Leaky Cauldron. It seems *he* rented a room there.” With this Remus moved over to the table, sat down next to Sirius, and gave the letter to the other remaining Marauder.

“So the claim he will be in Diagon on some appointments...” “...is real.” Said the twins, getting a determined look.

Sirius got nostalgic, the two of them reminded him so much of his own time as a prankster during his Hogwarts years.

“You kids will not go alone!” Molly put her foot down, before the teenagers could get funny ideas.

“Of course not,” agreed the owner of the house. “It might be a public place, but we can't be cautious enough.” With a gleam of mischief in his eyes, Sirius turned to Hermione. “What do you think about taking the dog of a friend out for a walk?”

Harry was standing in the garden of the biggest manor he had ever seen.
As promised the day before, Voldemort had taken him to see the Potter houses he deemed appropriate to live in. They had started right after a quiet breakfast that followed the familiar pattern of a shared newspaper and oddly mundane conversations.

Much to Harry’s relief, the happenings of the evening before had not come up until now, and he hoped it would stay that way until the evening.

They had started with the one manor on the short list. A big house with two ballrooms, an entire wing full of guest rooms... well, more like suites, several parlours, and studies. It had a really big kitchen and several rooms in the family wing. The family wing!

“Well...” Harry started, unsure of what to say.

“Maybe a little big, for only the two of us?” inquired Voldemort, glancing back at the grand front door, over his shoulder.

Harry nodded, it was too big for only two people. If they lived here, he would have a lot of space to avoid the other, but he was sure he would never be able to feel at home.

Startled by this thought – he wanted to feel at the home while living with this monster? – he quickly said the first positive thing about the manor he could think of. “I like the Quidditch pitch in the back.”

Tapping the index finger of his right hand against his chin, Voldemort looked around the slightly neglected garden. “If you want to use the pitch, you can do so without us living here.” He turned to look at Harry. “You can certainly come here to use it from time to time. This will be a great place to hold balls and parties of any kind.”

He smiled and Harry shuddered under the watchful red eyes. It was still a troubling sight to see the dark wizard smile.

“Shall we try the townhouse in Scotland?” the older wizard asked with a smile still in his voice.

Reluctantly, Harry stepped up to Voldemort. He did not like apparation, and needing to touch the man did not make it any better. He was only lucky that contact did not result in pain any more. He wondered why that might be.

Moments later, and after again being squeezed through an impossibly small rubber tube, they stood in the small front garden of an old townhouse, the noise of the city faintly reaching their ears.

The teen’s first impression was not favourable. The house front gave him a dark and miserable feeling. There was grotesque stone masonry to see near the roof, and the stone from which the house was built was dark and stained with decades of grime.

Voldemort produced a large and intricately designed wrought-iron key out of his pocket, went to the door, and used the key to open it.

As he had at the manor, he went first into the house, casting a few spells in rapid succession to make sure all was safe. Satisfied with the results, he gestured for Harry to follow him into the entrance hall. They took a good look around.

There was a lot of dark wood in the panelling, furniture, and flooring. Together with the dark paint – a murky green – on the walls above the panelling and the dark wool woven rugs, it was a rather gloomy place.
The few paintings of people hanging around the house did have quite the attitude, sneering at them and whispering among themselves. They looked nothing like the people Harry had seen in the mirror of Erised over Christmas in his first year at Hogwarts, so they probably were not Potters. But they seemed somewhat familiar.

From the size, the house was much more reasonable than the manor, but Harry was not happy with the atmosphere of the place.

“You do not like this one either?” Voldemort remarked after they had seen the third bedroom on the second floor. In this one a rather garish green and black together with dark oak dominated the décor.

Harry nodded, looking disgusted at a painting of a pale and drawn-looking woman with grey-blue eyes and a sour expression.

“Not really, no, Sir.” the teen answered glumly. At this rate he would not only be stuck with Voldemort, but in an unpleasant house to boot.

“Do not despair just yet, son,” Voldemort said, picking up Harry’s less-than-cheerful mood. “The files I got from the goblins indicated that this house was a wedding gift for your grandmother Dorea, a born Black. It certainly is their style, if I remember correctly from the one visit I made to the Black townhouse in London.” A look of remembrance shortly made an appearance, quickly replaced by one of calculation.

“Maybe I can use the ambience. And separate work from our home.”

Harry got slightly ill at the thought what ‘work’ might entail, and decided not to think about it too much.

They left the house, and Voldemort apparated them over to the last property the dark wizard considered a possible dwelling place.

The teen hoped this house would be better. At least if they were living in London, he would not be too far from Sirius.

Another unpleasant trip later, they were standing in the entrance hall of the second townhouse. The feeling was different from the last one, and Harry felt at home right from the start. Sunlight fell through the stained glass windows on both sides of the front door. The floor was oak, the rug a patterned grey weave with speckles of light golden tones. The walls were covered half with a cherry wood panelling from the floor to about halfway up, and painted in a light golden yellow from the ceiling down to the panelling.

This light-hearted colour scheme continued in the kitchen, with its dining area and furniture of white-painted wood, as well as all the other rooms Harry wandered through, followed by an amused looking Dark Lord.

On the ground floor there were, beside the entrance hall and kitchen, a study and a parlour with a door to the small garden in the back, a big wardrobe and storage room next to the kitchen, and a formal dining room with a table to seat twelve people.

The first floor up had a guest room and a library Harry wanted to show to Hermione as soon as possible.

Stepping into the study of Lord Potter, Harry’s eyes fell onto a painting of two persons. A man and a woman, in expensive robes in front of a shelf of books. They both smiled at him, the woman
dabbing an embroidered handkerchief at her silver-grey eyes. Beaming at the teen, the man in the painting, with the same unruly mop of black hair as Harry, spoke with happiness in his voice.

“You have to be Harry. This hair is our family curse, and you have Lily’s eyes.” He nodded and held a hand out to the boy in front of the portrait. “Welcome to Griffin House.”

The teen could only stand there and stare at the two, who, he assumed, had been his grandparents. Harry jumped a little in surprise as Voldemort entered the room behind him, and his grandfather’s gaze became so cold it could have frozen the entire great lake.

“As you can see, I did as I said and brought him here,” the red eyed wizard addressed the portrait’s occupants.

“Very well,” the late Lord Potter conceded and turned his attention back to his grandson, a smile returning to his face. “I am so glad to finally see you, Harry.” From behind his round glasses he shot another freezing gaze at the softly smiling dark wizard standing just inside the door. “How are you doing? He said you will live in one of the Potter properties, from now on. Do you know which one?”

Smiling, a little bewildered, Harry answered, his thoughts on other matters. “I’m not sure which I’ll pick.” He stared at his grandparents. Why had no one told him that there was a portrait of his father’s parents? Was it possible that a portrait had been made of his parents as well?

“Is it possible…. I mean, do you know? If…?” Harry stammered, not really daring to hope.

“I am afraid it's most unlikely,” Charlus said as gentle as he could. “Most do never consider having a portrait made. And the others wait well into their forties. I am sorry, Harry. But I don't think that our son and his wife had a portrait made.” The painted wizard tried an encouraging smile to cheer the young man up.

Before Charlus could say more, Voldemort indicated the clock on the mantle over the fireplace. “We need to leave soon, if you do not want to be late to the meeting with your friends. There will be ample opportunity for you to come here and speak with your grandparents.” Sauntering over to the desk, picking up one of the paperweights, he spoke, looking questioningly at Harry. “Are you able to pick a house for us to live in, now?”

The teen went over the impressions collected during their visits to the houses. The manor was simply too big, even if he liked the style and the pitch. The house in Edinburgh was too dark for Harry’s liking. Considering that the house here in London was nice like the manor and not as big, it was probably the best choice. The opportunity to speak with Charlus and Dorea was just the cherry on top of the cake. “I want to live here, sir,” Harry voiced his conclusion.

Over the excitement of meeting his friends again, he quickly forgot his sadness over the fact that his parents had not left him a portrait so he could get to know them even a little.

“Very well,” Voldemort nodded. “I will see to it that our things are moved. Ready to go meet your friends?”

The raven-haired teen nodded and turned to the portrait, smiling. “I'll come talk with you soon. See you!”

“Have a nice afternoon with your friends,” Dorea said in farewell.

With a cheery wave over his shoulder, gently directed to the door by a hand of Voldemort on his other one, Harry left the study and the house.
With mixed feelings, Harry prepared to be apparated again. On the one hand he was happy to be living in a house belonging to the Potter family, in a house with the portrait of his grandparents. On the other hand, Voldemort would be living there too. The teen was entirely unsure of what to think about that.


Together with his son, Marvolo walked down Diagon Alley to Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour. They were followed by Goyle and Crabbe acting as bodyguards. Not for him, but for his son. Even if he suspected the Order would be sending some adults to watch over the children, he preferred to make his own provisions.

Marvolo was amused by the way the other patrons were avoiding them, making a path for them, while backing away. During their last visit, Henry had been disturbed by this. But this afternoon he was too focused on the prospect of meeting with his friends to notice anything. It was funny to watch the boy. Maybe his suspicion about their apparent connection was unfounded? How could his son be this dependent on others and be carrying a part of his soul? But maybe the part was so small, that the influence was minimal or even non-existent? He sighed. No use in speculating now. The ritual would prove it one way or the other. Until then, he just had to wait.

Drawing nearer to their destination, he spotted several redheads. Oh joy, the Weasleys. Well, Henry had invited three of their children, so it had to be expected. As he spotted a huge black dog lying next to a young girl with bushy brown hair, a small smile briefly graced his face. So he had come. Nice to know that the man would take risks to see Henry.

Finally they reached the small group of people waiting for them, and Marvolo instantly spotted two sentries the Order had placed to watch.

Beside him, Henry was almost vibrating with suppressed need to run to his friends and hug them. So Marvolo was glad that he had insisted on drilling Henry in the proper protocol for such occasions before the party yesterday. So the boy waited for his father to greet the adults present, before he could rush to his friends.

“Mrs. Weasley, nice to meet you.” He bowed his head as protocol demanded from a Lord when greeting the matron of a house while in public. The Weasleys were poor, but nonetheless purebloods with a long history.

The look of surprise on the witch’s face was worth the small slight to his pride. “Nice to meet you too … Lord Slytherin.” There was a noticeable hesitation before his title, making his smile grow.

He turned to his son. Now after being polite to a blood traitor – no, that would not do, he needed to find a different word for those without wizarding pride, too – now, after being polite to a political adversary, it was time to make the impression of a caring parent.

“I want you to behave, Henry.” He waited for a nod of acknowledgement that he received almost as soon as he had stopped talking. “Do you have your portkey?”

“Yes, sir.” His son said, fishing the pendant out by its chain.
“Good. Use it if there is any trouble. Any trouble at all!”

He changed to parseltongue, noting the paling of the people gathered around the table. 

And he mean it! No heroics. If there is a problem, let the adults handle it. There are two of mine and two of the Order watching. So there is absolutely no need for you to do anything. Understood?:.

Henry gave him a furious look but nodded.

And now on to the other objective of this meeting. Marvolo got a folded parchment from the inner pocket of his dark green linen robes. “Here. You said you wanted to show this to your friends.”

With a look of wonder and suspicion, Henry took the family tree from Marvolo. How fast the emotions of the boy could change, and how easy it was to read them from his face.

With another small bow to the Weasley matriarch, Marvolo started to say his farewell. “Nice dog, Miss Granger.” Turning to the only adult at the table he added, “I will be at the Leaky Cauldron, if you need me, Mrs. Weasley. I will come here to pick my son up around 6 pm.”

With a last nod he left, leaving behind some stunned teenagers and a bewildered witch.

And now off to find a tutor for his son. He sighed. He was starting to get restless. This approach without violence was all nice, but it lacked opportunities to release tension.

After the man with his glamoured blue eyes had left, Harry let go of all enforced manners and almost ran the few last steps to his friends. Finding himself with an arm full of witch, his face buried in unruly curls, a black dog almost pushing him over in his quest to lick the teen's face, he laughed with relief. “I am so glad to see you all!”

“Oh, Harry! We were worrying so much! How are you? I’m so happy to see you!”

Laughing and pushing his friend back, Harry tried to calm Hermione down.

“I’m fine, Hermione. Really. And so happy to see you. And thanks for bringing Snuffles.” He smiled down to his godfather and then over to the twins, who were grinning broadly, their mother, with glittering eyes, and Ron, who looked a little peeved.

“Come sit down, all of you, and select what you want to have!” Mrs. Weasley commanded.

With a much lighter heart then he had had in the last days, Harry sat down and was soon sandwiched between one of the twins and Hermione. They each named the flavours they wanted to have, Mrs. Weasley noting them down before she went inside to give Mr. Fortescue their order.

The twins and Hermione were chatting happily, but Harry had trouble paying attention, as he was staring at Ron. His first friend was looking at his hands, only then and now sending heated glares at the others.

“What's wrong, Ron?” he just had to ask. He didn't know when he would see him again, if there was a problem, they should talk now.
Now all eyes were on Ron, who flushed with anger and embarrassment.

“You look like that pompous git Malfoy!” growled the young boy, earning surprised looks from his brothers, an enraged one from Hermione, and a growl from the large black dog sitting next to Harry.

The teen with his mop of black hair had gone pale. This blow had hurt. Why would Ron say something like that?

“Ron!” exclaimed Hermione, the first to get her wits back under control. “How can you be so shallow?” She turned to Harry, her face getting soft. “You look great, Harry.”

Slobbering Harry’s hand, the animagus, currently not able to change back, expressed his agreement with the young witch’s assessment.

Under the murderous glares of his brothers, Ron shrank into his chair before pushing it back and storming away.

“What's wrong with him?” Harry asked no one in particular.

“Little, ickle Ronnikins has been gloomy the last days.” “We thought that...” “...He was worried for you,” “...Harry.”

The twins looked bewildered, one looking in the direction Ron had vanished, the other at Harry.

With a slightly wavering smile – he had hoped after the tournament that Ron was over his issues – Harry nodded to them and patted his godfather's head. Taking a calming breath, using one of the meditation exercises he had read about in the book Voldemort had had him read, he let his anger go. It was not the first time Ron had acted in anger and without thinking things through. Being the youngest son with five older brothers, he got way too many hand-me-downs. Seeing Harry in completely new and expensive clothes – silk and finest wool for today – was almost certain to spark the other teen's jealousy. He did not like it, was hurt and angry, but... “Well, he's not completely wrong,” Harry said softly. “I think this,” he pinched his robe to make clear what he was speaking about, “was made by the tailor the Malfoys use, too.”

“You look better.” “Must be something about...” “...the fact that you're not...” “...a bloody git!” exclaimed the twins, grinning like maniacs.

Their antics never failed to cheer Harry up, and so he chuckled and smiled gratefully.

Before they could start a new conversation, Mrs. Weasley came back, followed by Florean levitating a large tray filled with bowls overflowing with ice cream of the most delicious flavours.

“Where's Ron?” his mother wanted to know.

“He stormed off...” “...in a huff.” was the twin's response, as they distributed the ice cream around the table, floating the bowls, revelling in the fact that they were old enough to use magic out of school. The last bowl was placed on the floor, attacked on the spot by the dog, licking happily on the treat.

Used to the back-and-forth talk of her twins, Mrs. Weasley looked over to Hermione for confirmation and got a little nod and shrug in response.

“Eat your ice cream. I'll look for your brother.” Muttering to herself, the Weasley matriarch hurried over to Tonks, standing guard in the shade by one of the apothecaries.
Determined to not let Ron’s behaviour spoil his afternoon with his friends, Harry plunged the spoon into his mound of chocolate-mint-hazelnut ice cream and smiled at his friends, asking, “Now, what have you been doing since I … left?”

“Searching for a way to free you, of course,” said Hermione, eating her vanilla-strawberry sundae at a much more sedate pace.

“And? Found something useful?” Harry wanted to know, even if he was almost certain that his book-wise friend had found nothing. Voldemort was too sure of himself for there to be any way to get Harry away from him.

Hermione’s crestfallen expression and sad brown eyes answered the question without the use of words. “If we could prove that you aren't related to You-Know-Who, or if we had evidence that he wasn't a fit guardian…” she trailed off, curious over the pained look from Harry.

“If anyone thought the Dursleys fit guardians, then Voldemort would be considered fit, too.” He shook his head at the astonishment on his friends’ faces. “Did you know that I’ll be Lord Potter once I turn seventeen? That I need to know a lot of things to fill this responsibility?” Searching their faces he slowly nodded at what he found. “So you did know. I didn't, until he told me the afternoon he adopted me.” Raking his hair in frustration, Harry took another deep breath. “Why did you never tell me?”

Looking a tad guilty, Hermione cleared her throat. “I thought you knew. And as you don't like to talk about your fame, I thought this was a part of it. And I only learned in third year.”

Eager nods from the twins, their mouths full of ice cream, indicated that they had thought the same.

“Well, I didn't know.” Getting the folded ancestry tree from his pocket, Harry continued to relay the information Hermione would need to find a way. “And I am related to him. We went to Gringotts for an ancestry test on Thursday. And this is the result.” He smoothed the parchment out, turning it so Hermione could read it readily, tracing the path from himself, over his mother, all the way up to the Gaunts. “These two are on Voldemort’s tree, too. We are related.”

Hermione followed the path with her own finger, going further back, all the way up to Salazar Slytherin. With a trembling jaw she looked up at Harry and down to the tree again. “Your mother had wizarding ancestors? You're a descendant of Slytherin?” She got the look in her eyes that Harry recognized as the one she always got when she found something she wanted to research.

“You don't need to search more about ways to free me, based on not being related.”

But Hermione did not listen. “How does this test work? Why go to a bank to get it performed?” The gleam in her eyes intensified. “Do you think I could go and get the test done?”

Shrugging Harry said “Well, yes. Why not? I think anyone with the money to pay it can get it done.”

“Well,” she demanded impatiently, “why in Gringotts? And how does it work?”

“You need to let some blood drop onto a prepared parchment. And…” briefly Harry contemplated what he should do. Tell her what Voldemort told him? Or pretend to be oblivious about how it worked?

“Something about a treaty between the goblins and wizards. I’m not quite sure.” He shrugged again.
“I think I'll go now,” the bushy-haired witch announced, getting up. “I want to know now. And I have the money.”

The boys exchanged looks, but did not try to dissuade her. After the whole business with the SPEW in the last school year, they knew better than to stand between Hermione and her intended target.

Her decision made, Hermione finished her ice cream, then stood to leave for the bank. She passed by Mrs. Weasley, who brought back her youngest son, only briefly stopping to ask where the younger witch was headed.

Ron was made to apologize by his mother. And the rest of the afternoon was spent in slightly awkward conversations, over summer plans and pranks the twins had in mind for their last year at Hogwarts.

That was, until Hermione came back. Then they had to console a distressed friend.

ooooOOooo

Sitting behind the table in one of the private rooms off the main dining room in the Leaky Cauldron, Marvolo was rubbing his temples. The second applicant had just left, and he felt a headache coming. This was a veritable nightmare!

The first applicant had been a blubbering fool that obviously had been living under a rock somewhere, because he had not known anything about Marvolo’s previous identity and had almost fainted at the question of whether he would be able to work for the man who had been Voldemort. The slightly overweight man had left quickly after that.

The second applicant, an elderly witch, had seemed to think that she could win favour with him by repeating all the rhetoric about pure blood and how it was superior to anything else. Well, she maybe would have been right only a few weeks back. But now, and considering he was searching for a tutor to teach The-Boy-Who-Lived, this was an instant means to be out of running for the position.

He closed his eyes, groaning slightly, leaning back in the chair. He felt the need to punish someone, to curse someone into next week and back. When had been the last time he held someone under the cruciatus curse? Too long, it seemed. Not feeling it prudent to punish the last one to arrive at a meeting, he still had to concede that this practice had the benefit of providing a target for his need to make others suffer, every time.

He would have to find another outlet for his urges if he was to keep up the face of Lord Slytherin as an upstanding member of society.

Maybe he should make some of his followers practice duelling with him. He would get to hit them with some curses, relieve some of his tension, and there would be nothing unreasonable about it. Yes, that was a plan he could try.

Standing up to straighten his clothes, and taking a few steps before the next applicant arrived, Marvolo took a look at his list of names. The next one would be Remus Lupin. At least the man would know who he was, and would not try to impress him by repeating meaningless prejudice.

He hoped that the werewolf would be an option. Giving Henry more of his past in a controlled
setting would serve to secure the boy’s will to stay and not do anything foolish. Considering his past actions, there was a high probability of the boy's taking matters into his own hands if he was not satisfied with a situation.

He just had taken his seat again, filling the cup with fresh tea, when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” the red-eyed wizard – he had discarded the glamour as soon as he had sat foot into the room – called out.

In stepped a lean man, wearing some robes that clearly had been of good quality once, but had long since lost their aura of wealth. Now they were threadbare at the hems, and had more than one attached patch that told a story of poverty, even if they were artfully done.

“Mr. Lupin?” Marvolo asked for confirmation and got a tiny nod in response.

“That's right, Lord Slytherin,” the former Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher said with another polite nod of his head.

Well, that was a nice change. No outward animosity, but no grovelling either. Not many wizards knowing of his past actions were able to pull that off.

“Please take a seat.” Lupin complied, sitting down in the chair across from Marvolo, on the other side of the table.

“Would you like some tea?” Bemused, Marvolo realized that he had offered tea quite often lately to people he had meetings with. It felt funny in a way to act this hospitable, but it served its purpose, so why change it? And so he let the teapot float over and fill a cup in mid air.

Getting comfortable and looking a last time at the curriculum vitae the man had provided, the former insane madman started his questions. “I see that you have taught at Hogwarts, Mr. Lupin. So your experience with teaching teenagers is not something I would doubt. But you were not teaching history. What qualifies you for the position as a history tutor?”

Avoiding eye contact, Lupin locked his gaze firmly some centimetres over Marvolo’s left shoulder, answering the question with unwavering politeness. “I had an Outstanding in my History OWLs and NEWTs, mostly through self-study. I never stopped studying my favourite subject, and would like very much to teach it to some young witches and wizards who are suffering under the tenure of Professor Binns.”

Marvolo hid a smirk at this response. Suffering was the right description for sitting in one of Binns’ lectures. He had had the dubious pleasure of being taught by the ghost in his own years at Hogwarts, mostly using the time to do study on his own, and not always on the subject matter of the lesson.

Nodding in acceptance – he had records of the OWL and NEWT scores with the other information in the application – he moved on to the next question. “Will you be able to work for me? Accept money from me and act on my wishes?” He did not need to add why these things might be a problem for the man sitting, seemingly relaxed, opposite from him. They both knew well enough what was standing between them.

“For Harry, I will,” was the calm and simple reply.

“Your duties would be as follows: tutoring my son Henry,” he stressed both of these words, “in History so he can pass his OWLs with at least an Exceeded Expectations. I think lessons on three days a week are a minimum requirement. I also would like you to continue to support his attempts
at studying by himself over the term. It is obvious that he needs a little more guidance to
accomplish a reasonable effort.” The werewolf seemed to agree to this, slowly nodding his head,
still refusing to make eye contact. A smart man. Marvolo was intrigued.

“I also demand that you, Mr. Lupin, take wolfsbane for every full moon. I will provide the potion.
You can stay wherever you want during that night, but I can provide a warded area with a sparse
forest you could run in.” Severus had brewed the potion for the man over his entire time as
professor at Hogwarts and would do so again on his command. And the manor they had visited
today had a small forest inside its wards. With only a few, small updates to the wards, it would
serve quite well as a place for a transformed werewolf to run free.

With a slight narrowing of his eyes, the man with grey flecked light brown hair asked a question of
his own. “From where do you intend to get the potion, Lord Slytherin? It's a complicated brew and
highly toxic if not prepared right. I will not consent to risking my health and life over a potion from
a shady apothecary.”

Even this accusation was brought forward with the most polite tone. Marvolo could see hiring this
man. He was quite entertaining, something he could use now and then.

“I will ask Potions Master Severus Snape to brew it. He already brews all the potions my son and I
need. I see no reason why he should refuse, or why you might question the quality of a potion
prepared by him.”

There was a small flinch in the hazel eyes of Lupin at the mentioning of his and Henry’s new
status. So the werewolf was not as cool as he pretended to be with all this.

“I indeed know of the quality that Severus always strives for in all potions he brews. There will be
no problem with this from my side.”

“Good,” Marvolo accepted. “You will receive a salary similar to that which you got as a Hogwarts
professor. You can also have a flat in one of the Potter houses. There are quite a few standing
empty at the moment.“ Looking again at the shabby robes of the young wizard, he added
thoughtfully, “And if I hire you, you would have to accept at least two sets of decent robes. I will
not have someone working for me, making me look stingy.”

Marvolo almost let a smile slip at the quickly hidden surprise and bruised pride on the werewolf’s
face.

After getting a reluctant nod to his last proposal, Marvolo started a discussion over some
controversial topics from different times in history. Remus Lupin was the first applicant reaching
this state of the application interview, and Marvolo was not sure if he even should bother
interviewing the others.

ooOoo

Finally out of the room and out of the pub, back in Diagon Alley, Remus took several deep breaths
and rolled his shoulders. Tension was slowly seeping out of him. That had been a rather tense half-
hour.

But he got the feeling that it would be worth it. Not only because the pay would be high, the same
money he got for teaching seven years of students in almost fourteen classes at five days of the
week, for teaching only one student was generous indeed. The addition of the offer of a flat, the robes – that offer still grated on his pride – and the wolfsbane potion, made the offer almost too good to be true.

He sighed and started to walk back to the ice-cream parlour. He hoped that he would get the job, keeping close to Harry would be worth his pride. More than worth it, if he was honest with himself.

Quickening his stride, Remus smiled at the thought of spending the rest of the afternoon in Harry’s company.

oooOOooo

The sun was casting patterns onto the wooden floor of the small room. The shadows had travelled quite a bit in the time Marvolo had been speaking to the applicants who had passed the first test with their applications.

Gathering his papers and notes, shrinking them down, and shoving them into his pocket, Marvolo checked quickly that he had not left anything behind before leaving.

The main room of the Leaky Cauldron had filled quite a bit, with witches and wizards eating dinner and drinking something at the bar. Silence fell as he stepped into the room, and all eyes followed him. As the door closed behind him, voices erupted into excited chatter. Smiling evilly, Marvolo stepped up to the brick wall, tapping the bricks to open the passage. It was nice to know that he still was feared.

As he came closer to the place he had left his son, he spotted the teenagers having a lively discussion. Checking, he saw both pairs of sentries in the same places they had been in earlier. Shifting his attention back to the table, Marvolo noticed that one of the redheads was sitting sulkily and turned away from the others at the table.

One of the identical redheads was the first one who noticed his approach. He elbowed his brother sitting beside him, and silence quickly fell over the group.

Looking up, Henry spotted him and the smile vanished, replaced by a calm mask. Pleased by this sign the boy was learning how to behave as a respectable heir, Marvolo nodded to the adults at the table, Mrs. Weasley and Mr. Lupin, before addressing his son.

“Did you have a nice afternoon, Henry?” he tried to inject care and friendliness into his voice and was not at all sure if he really succeeded. Portraying the caring father was something new, maybe he should arrange something to enable him to observe some of the parents among his followers with their children, to get more to base his own actions on.

“Yes, we had a nice afternoon, Sir,” was the teen's answer. But the short worried glance over to Miss Granger and another, not worried but resigned glance, at the younger Weasley boy, Ronald, told another tale.

As Miss Granger looked like something was troubling her, and the boy only seemed to be sulking about something, probably inconsequential, the dark wizard decided to try to get more information
about the young girl’s plight. “Why are you looking so worried, Miss Granger? I hope there was no problem for you all because Henry was here?”

Startled, the girl looked up, attempting a smile. “Not at all, Lord Slytherin. I'm simply not feeling well at the moment.”

Henry gave her a sympathetic look and pat on her arm.

Marvolo contemplated Whether it was worth prying more, as a snort from the younger Weasley boy drew the attention of all to him.

“Of course you're not feeling well. Learning that you're related to the Lestranges is rather shocking. I'd be sick, too, if it were me!” he drawled with a scowl on his face, not noticing the murderous looks he got from his brothers and Henry, instead looking at his feet and the cobblestones of the street.

Grasping what must have occurred earlier this afternoon, Marvolo turned to his son, a brow raised questioningly.

“I showed Hermione the ancestry tree. She was curious about her own ancestors and went to have the test done herself. What she found shocked her quite badly,” Henry reported reluctantly and with quick gazes to his friend, making sure she was not angry over his sharing her secret.

So his theory had another proof. Another so-called muggle-born with magical ancestors. It seemed possible that magic needed some fresh blood now and then to stay strong. He was not sure how he would sell this to the more fanatic of his followers.

“How far back is the connection?” Marvolo asked politely, trying to get into a conversation about this. “I went to school with Xerxes Lestrange, and am still in contact with him. I could introduce you to him, if you would like to get to know your wizarding relatives, Miss Granger.”

The girl in question was visibly contemplating what to do. Accept the offer and get the access to more possibilities to gather knowledge, or decline it and stay away from a family infamous for being dark?

The other adults seemed thrown by the revelation and did nothing to stop him from taking a few steps closer to the table, peering at the folded parchment in front of the young witch.

He smiled as she opened the parchment and turned it, so he could read it. He let his eyes widen seeing the tree. On the mother’s side there were only unreadable blobs, a pure muggle ancestry. But on the father’s side, there was a Squib, his mother, the girl’s grandmother. The names of her parents were familiar to Marvolo. A second later he knew why they seemed familiar. They were Xerxes' parents! His old school... friend was the girl's granduncle.

“My friend will be happy to learn that the family is not doomed to extinction. With both his sons in Azkaban and them without children of their own, it was a great concern of his.” He bowed slightly to the wide-eyed staring girl. “It would be a pleasure for me to introduce you to your family.”

He felt that they were no longer welcome... well he was no longer welcome, so he gestured to Henry to come over to him. “Thank you for looking after my son,” he bowed to the adults as well as to the transformed wizard sitting at the feet of his godson. “Have a pleasant evening.” He waited impatiently, while Henry embraced the twins and the Lestrange girl as well as the adults, including the dog, and turned him to leave the moment he stepped to stand beside him.

Walking through the street, followed by the two wizards acting as their guards and followed by the
curious gazes of many others, Marvolo contemplated how to best use the information he had gathered today.

He had not known that Xerxes had had a sister. It was not surprising, though, as Squibs generally were hidden from society, cast out, or killed. Something he needed to change. It would be best to somehow get the girl under the influence, if not the custody, of the Lestrange Head of House. He was not certain yet if he would manage to get his other followers out of Azkaban. And even if he found a way, it was not certain that they would be able to live in the open as themselves. That would be, of course, the ideal scenario, but sadly, it was unlikely.

Maybe the trial for Lord Black would show him a way to get them out, at least a few of them. Was it possible to create evidence clearing some of them, by placing the blame on others? It was a course of action he would have to examine.

But they would have to wait. First he needed to test his theory on his and Henry’s connection, then he could start with thinking about ways to rescue his most faithful.

Back at Grimmauld Place a few hours later, Hermione sat heavily down on the bed she was using, confused and a little anxious. What should she do with this new information?

She still remembered her gran. She had been a kind woman, with carefully-styled white hair and bright blue eyes. She had always smiled and listened to her granddaughter's reading her stories. She had liked those with magic in them the most.

But she never spoke. At the time she already had lost most of herself to her illness. Dementia. Death of personality and knowledge, long before death of the body.

Hermione wondered, if she had been borne a few years earlier, would she have known of the magical ancestry long before now? Would she have known about Hogwarts, magic, and about being a witch? It was likely, as her gran would have been able to tell her all about it, being born to magical parents.

What had it been like, living without magic in the magical world? Being cast out from the family, denied all contact? She was furious for her grandmother. Squibs weren't treated any better than house-elves, or so it seemed. There had to be something she could do about it!

But first she would write a letter to her parents. Tell them about what she had discovered today. They deserved to know.

Getting up and walking over to the desk, Hermione sat down in the creaky chair, getting out a piece of parchment, the ink, and her favourite quill, and started on the letter.

Avoiding stepping onto an albino peacock, Harry followed behind Voldemort on his way up to
Malfoy Manor. They had apparated instead of flooed, to avoid being overheard, as their destination was to remain a secret. Therefore they had arrived in front of the gates to the grounds and not inside the house.

Harry had to admit that the building they were walking up to was quite impressive. It seemed to be as huge as the Potter manor they had visited earlier today. Several wings to the building, more than two stories, surrounded by extensive gardens.

But this observation only briefly occupied his mind. The happenings of this afternoon, Hermione’s unexpected ancestry, Ron’s anger, and the problems his first friend’s jealousy probably would cause, as well as his apprehension over what they were going to do this evening, left no room for admiring a building.

He was startled out of his thoughts as they reached the large, ornately carved double doors. They swung open without Voldemort's doing anything that Harry could see. Inside the door Harry looked around and noticed the great chandelier hanging from the high ceiling, the tiled floor with its geometric pattern, a few sophisticated pieces of furniture, and several paintings of wizards. All in expensive robes from different epochs, but all with white-blond hair and steel-grey eyes.

A house-elf bowed to them, and Voldemort sent it to announce to the owner of the Manor that Lord Slytherin was here.

Only moments later the blond Lord Malfoy came into the entrance hall through the smaller door on the right side. He was not carrying his cane and was clothed in what passed for casual robes for the man. He bowed deeply when he was a few steps away from the door, and Harry could have sworn that Draco’s father had almost fallen to his knees.

An image of the same man in dark robes, his face hidden behind a bone-white mask, dropping to his knees, crawling over the ground to kiss the hem of a black robe worn by a man resembling a snake flashed before Harry’s inner eye.

It seemed the change in Voldemort was not as big as he wanted all of wizarding Britain to believe.

“My Lord, the ritual room as been prepared as you ordered.” Another small bow accompanied this information, and was not acknowledged by Voldemort at all.

The dark-haired man simply stalked off into the direction the other man had come from, glancing back over his shoulder to make sure Harry was following him.

Pushing the mixed bag of other worries into the background, Harry’s anxiety over what was about to happen took the front seat. Not daring to risk making the man angry, Harry hurried to follow, convinced he would get lost in the manor if he did not stay close to the red-eyed monster.

After a short, hurried walk through several rooms – a ballroom, music room, a gentleman's parlour, a study. Harry had trouble identifying them all – they reached a hall ending at a plain wooden door.

Voldemort opened it by turning the glass handle and gestured for Harry to precede him into the room. Hesitantly the teenager stepped over the threshold into a room made entirely from dark bare stone. From the smooth floor to the bland windowless walls, all was made from the same lightly shimmering slate-grey stone. Their steps echoed as they walked to the middle. Turning to Voldemort, Harry observed as the man took a small pouch from his robe pocket, waving his wand over it to return it to its original size. A white shirt, long enough to fall at least to the knees, was produced and handed to the teen.
“Change into this. You should not wear anything else. And I mean it!” Harry found himself under an intense stare and had trouble keeping calm. “Anything that is not cleansed can interfere with the ritual. So please remove all your clothing, fold it, and then slip into the shirt,” Voldemort added in explanation.

Walking over to one corner of the room, frowning but not complaining, Harry was glad that the room seemed to be heated, at least a little. While he started to remove his shoes and socks, Voldemort got several stones, different coloured candles, chalk and herbs, a bowl made from some shiny metal, and a few vials out of the pouch.

Making quick work of getting undressed, his back turned to the other wizard, Harry was quickly finished. The shirt fell down over his knees. Before he could lift his stack of clothing it started to float, directed by Voldemort’s wand, through the room and onto a small shelf, formerly hidden behind a slab of stone, now leaning against the wall.

“Come over here, Henry,” Voldemort said in a friendly voice. As the teen came into arm's reach, the dark wizard laid his hand on his shoulder, turning him to face the material positioned on the floor.

Without much fuss the taller man launched into his explanation. “You will be sitting inside a circle I will erect around you. To do so, I will place the candles and draw runes on the floor. All you have to do is sit, breathe as calmly and regularly as you can manage, and wait. Do not speak or move until I tell you to. Understood?”

Eyeing the candles, Harry nodded, turned and walked over to the place Voldemort indicated. He sat down, and immediately got the impression that it would get uncomfortable fast, sitting on the hard, cold stone floor in nothing but a thin shirt.

Once he was positioned, Voldemort got really busy. First he placed the pouch in the niche before closing it with the stone slab. After that he placed the four candles, one white, one blue, one a dark red, and the last one brown, in a cross formation. One was in front of Harry, one behind, one to his left and one to his right.

Then he started to draw intricate symbols on the smooth surface of the floor. If he had not been so nervous, Harry would have had difficulty to not laugh at the sight of Voldemort moving around the room on hands and knees.

By the time the circle of symbols was finished, Harry could no longer feel his buttocks, and his feet were starting to lose feeling, too. He wished he had asked for a time – so he would know how long it would take – or a pillow to sit on.

Taking one of the vials into his hand, removing the stopper, Voldemort started to chant something in a language Harry did not understand. A fluid, changing its colour, began to flow from the vial, floating through the air and making contact with the chalk drawings. The chalk absorbed the fluid, starting to glow, the air growing heavy, and breathing getting more difficult. One after the other the vials were opened, adding to the glow of the circle, which got brighter, more colourful and pulsed faster and faster. Herbs placed in the bowl suddenly caught fire, filling the room with their smoke and scent.

Harry struggled to keep calm, surrounded by pulsing magic so thick, he wondered if it would become visible soon.

Just as he thought he could not stand the growing pressure any more, Voldemort’s chanting changed in tone and pace, and Harry felt the magic entering him, coursing through him, into every
finger and toe, from the top of his head to the sole of his feet, warm and cold at the same time, tingling with energy, holding him in place.

An eerie light filled the whole room, and suddenly everything was over.

Harry lay panting on his side, head resting on the cool floor, his scar burning, the rest of his body cold and sore.

He watched as shiny dress shoes made their way over to him, robes pooling on the floor as the owner of the feet crouched down by his side.

“Henry? Can you hear me, son?”

Blinking, Harry tried to get up, but abandoned the effort on the spot. It was much too difficult to move at all.

Gentle hands turned his head so he was looking up to the ceiling, instead of off to the far wall. He blinked stupidly up into red eyes and noticed for the first time the many shades of red present in them. It took him much too long to recognize the grim expression on the face looking down at him.

“Let’s get you back home and into bed,” Voldemort said, scooping the boy up, and walking purposefully out of the room. With a lolling head, Harry briefly wondered if the man had tidied up after himself. Slowly getting his wits back, the teen noticed Mr. Malfoy walking beside them, but could not follow what they were speaking about. Before they were back in the entrance hall, he was back in control enough again, to remember what the reason had been to perform the ritual at all.

.:Did it work?: he tiredly hissed. He did not want Malfoy to understand what he was asking.

.:Yes:. was the hissed reply, sounding tense .:I was right. But I will explain tomorrow. You are not able to follow a complicated explanation at the moment:..

Harry nodded his head a little. He had to agree, he was much too tired to stay awake for much longer.

He was slipping into a light sleep as he heard two cracks of apparition. Some angry words and rustling of cloth was the last he heard before sleep claimed him.

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
Marvolo was walking carefully back to the entrance hall. In his arms lay the limp body of his son, breathing quietly now, exhausted and barely aware of his surroundings. He looked down on his son and wondered how this boy could be a container for a part of his soul and still be this… innocent. That was probably the best way to express it.

The manor was quiet, as it was no longer early evening, and he encountered no one for quite a bit of their journey back to the front hall. He could have breached the wards, Lucius had given him access to them, so he could lower them if necessary, but there was no need, and he wanted to give Henry some time to recover before apparating them back.

A few years back... well, more like a few decades, really, while researching ways to become immortal, he had wondered why those two rituals existed. One to identify your own horcrux inside of an object, and another one for the same, only when the container was a living being. Marvolo remembered clearly that he had scoffed at this ridiculous idea. Who would entrust a means to their immortality to another living being? And who would forget what they had used?

He had assumed, then, that living for hundreds of years could cause a loss of details in one's memories, so that one would need a means to check. But that had made no sense for the ritual for checking living beings. He was glad it existed. Had he had to invent one himself, it would have taken that much longer to gain certainty. After what he now knew, that splitting one's soul too often meant to lose sanity of mind and magical strength, he could understand the warnings, subtle as they were, that had been written into the texts he had read. Had someone else walked his path? Made their souls unstable to the point they created unintended horcruxes? It was no longer an impossibility. But he still thought his first explanation, that he had come up with in his teenage days, the most likely. Some witches and wizards invented rituals, potions, or spells, just to prove they could. Not because they intended to use them, or even needed them.

Well, it was futile to ponder on this conundrum too much. He had more important things to do. One right at this moment was to get his son back to Nott House and into bed. And to get some sleep himself, as he had not slept the night before.

The ritual had needed a number of potions that he’d had to brew himself no more than a day before they were to be used. And so he had spent last night in the potions lab brewing several potions, containing his tears, blood, spit, and … other bodily fluids. It was a rather intricate ritual.

Reaching the music room, with a grand piano taking the centre, he saw Lucius coming in through the door from the direction Marvolo was heading. The Lord bowed low, falling into step beside his liege.
“I hope all went well, my Lord?” inquired the blond man politely.

Marvolo smirked, he could practically feel the urge to ask what exactly he had been doing radiating off the wizard.

“It did,” was his short answer, he had no intention of telling his follower about his horcruxes at all, and so there was no reason to explain his doings.

“How is your work progressing, Lucius? Anything new from the Ministry?”

Obediently Lucius launched into a report on the happenings of the last days. It seemed that the new Head of the Wizengamot was well on his way to have everything prepared for the postponed meeting. Everyone was excited over the trial to be held the day after tomorrow, and Lucius still was looking for laws that could be exploited to their benefit.

Marvolo added another specific request to the list of topics that the blond should cover. All laws that concerned magical guardians and sponsors regarding young witches and wizards with a lack of magical parents.

The boy in his arms stirred and blinked up to him. Hissing his question, if it had worked. Hissing back his reply, smirking at the stiffening of the elder Malfoy at the sound of the serpents language, Marvolo noticed that Henry would be sleeping for real soon.

The three of them reached the entrance hall, and Marvolo turned to the man beside him to say his goodbye, as two resounding cracks echoed through the high room. The red eyes fell onto three persons that had appeared before him.

One of them was bound and unconscious, the other two were the Death Eaters he had sent after the traitor.

“Amicus. Alecto. What are you two doing here?” Marvolo inquired in a frosty tone.

The Carrow twins bowed with a shiver – this tone never preceded anything good – and quickly communicated with a glance who of them would answer their Lord. Marvolo was looking at the prisoner in the meantime, trying to identify the wizard. Not an easy task as he obviously had been beaten quite thoroughly, resulting in eyes swollen shut and bruises concealing the man’s features.

“We have fetched the traitor for you, my Lord.” Alecto's voice was filled with pride and her posture, even bowed and looking at the ground, spoke of confidence and happy anticipation. She and her brother seemed to believe that they had done well.

“Please remind me, what were your orders, Amicus?” Marvolo had no time for this. His son needed sleep, and for this he should be in his bed. Sighing inwardly the rubine-eyed man came to the conclusion that this would become his second night without sleep in a row.

But a light began gleaming in the depths of crimson-flashing eyes. Maybe he could indulge in some of his favourite stress relief activities tonight.

“We should find the traitor, observe him and gather information, my Lord.” Finally the twins caught up to the fact, that they maybe had made a blunder. Their posture lost its confidence, and they barely managed not to look to each other for reassurance.

Faster than any of the others could see, Marvolo had his wand in his hand, and Alecto was writhing on the floor, her red hair escaping its pins, spilling over the black and white tiling.
Switching his focus to the trembling brother, Marvolo spoke calmly and with ice in his voice to the man. “Explain why you thought you could act outside of my orders, and kidnap the traitor. Bringing him here.”

He held the curse and Amycus hurried to explain, ignoring his sister’s plight, or trying to, as Marvolo could clearly see that he flinched every time a scream tore from her throat.

“The coward went into the mountains, just as a storm was rising. He was warned by all that saw him go, and we followed unnoticed.” The man with short, curly red hair swallowed. “All will assume that he lost his way in the storm, falling down some cliff to his death.”

Marvolo thought that the man had a point, but was distracted as Henry started to squirm and moan, furrowing his brow in his sleep, like he was having a bad dream. Realising that this was a reaction to his casting one of the Unforgivables, or his anger, he lifted the curse, leaving Alecto a panting mess on the floor.

“The next time you see fit to change plans so drastically, inform me before just apparating with a prisoner into a place where someone light could be at the time.” He regarded his trembling followers before he rearranged his son, who was sleeping a little calmer now. He needed to take some actions to make sure his son would get a good night’s sleep without being influenced by the things Marvolo was planning to do.

“Place him in a secure location. Then wait for my call.” With these last, quietly uttered words, Marvolo turned with swirling robes, his son still held in his arms, nodded to Lucius in thanks for the use of the ritual room, and apparated away.

ooOoo

Standing in a dark room, peering out through the crack of the not quite closed door, Draco had trouble keeping his frantic breathing silent.

It was the first time he had seen the cruciatus curse performed on a human being. He had had trouble understanding the warning that his father had repeatedly given. Those were now gone. This man was no one to antagonize, not someone Draco would dare risk to irritate.

Watching as the red-haired man – Amycus, the Dark Lord had called him – helped the woman to stand, Draco calmed his racing heart. He needed to find a way to stop teasing Po… no, he was no longer only a Potter. Furrowing his brow, Draco wondered how he should call the Dark Lord’s heir in his own mind. Maybe Henry? No, that would not do either. If he slipped up, he might end up calling the other boy by his given name without getting his permission first. So the new last name, Slytherin, was probably his safest bet.

He needed to find a way to stop teasing Slytherin. If he didn't, there was no chance for him to ever reach somewhat neutral terms with his Lord’s adopted son.

Deep in thought, the Malfoy heir retreated, just as his father levitated the prisoner out of the entrance hall towards the back, and the hidden stairs to the dungeons, that were located under the cellar rooms.
Coming from a game of chess with his father – he had lost, again – Theodore walked through the entrance hall on his way to the stairs. He had hoped that Henry would be back by now and they could talk about the houses the other teen had visited with his father earlier today. Worrying about their young summer guest, Theodore made his way past the spot reserved for apparation, as the telltale crack of an apparation made him jump.

Turning, his eyes fell on the Dark Lord carrying an unconscious Henry. At least Theodore hoped the other was only unconscious. One never could know with the Dark Lord.

The man nodded in Theodore’s direction and strode off, with the teen, clad only in a long, pristine white shirt, held securely in his arms.

His worry had to be pretty obvious, because the Dark Lord started to talk moments later, taking the first step on the way to the bedrooms.

“He will be as good as new in the morning. He is only exhausted.”

Theodore was surprised by the explanation and the soft tone of voice it was spoken in, so he could only watch the man carry his son up to the bedrooms. The closing of a door was what brought him out of his stupor. Continuing on his way, he was struck by a realisation. The Dark Lord had carried Henry. In his arms. Why would he do that, as he could have just used magic to levitate or float the teen?

Deciding that he was much too tired to think about something this complicated, Theodore opened the door to his bedroom and went in.

Time to go to sleep. He would ask Henry in the morning about his day.

With a little wandless magic Marvolo opened the door to his son’s room. Or rather, the guest room he was staying in. The boy still was much too light. He had had no troubles carrying him through the whole of Malfoy Manor and Nott House to get him to his bed.

Another bit of wandless magic turned to blankets down, so he could place the teen on his bed. No need to change him into different clothes, the shirt he was still wearing would do an adequate job as sleepwear.

The tall wizard sat down beside his son on the bed. Smoothing the messy fringe away from the boy’s forehead, Marvolo laid eyes on the scar. The infamous scar all were constantly speaking about. The one place that had glowed with an intensive black-seeming light during the ritual. The son he had adopted was an unintentional horcrux. Had the piece of his soul influenced the boy? Or
those around him? Maybe it had been the other way around, and the tiny piece of soul had been influenced by residing in an innocent child for almost fourteen years? There wasn't really a way to know.

The important thing was that they find a way to cope with the strange connection this soul piece forged between them. And maybe to find a way to remove the horcrux without harming the container. But first, a way to prevent the bleeding-over of their emotions.

Thinking about this, tonight promised to become one with many potentially strong emotions, likely to affect his son. Not something he would like to happen. A strong sleeping potion or draught might do the trick.

“Flimm!” Marvolo called for the Potter elf he had assigned to his son.

With a soft sound the elf appeared in the room, a few steps away from the bed, right in front of Marvolo. “Young Master's guardian is calling. What do you need?”

The so-address man smirked, elves had a way to let their disapproval be heard.

“Get a dreamless sleep for Henry,” he ordered without explanation. He needed to acquire his own elf, or elves. He was sure the moment his son turned seventeen, those he could call now all would cease to follow his orders. Maybe he should plan to create a fortune for the name of Slytherin. At the moment, both he and his son were living off the Potter wealth. It would be best to separate the fortunes, properties, and such, so that his son’s children could carry on the two family names as separate families.

At that moment Flimm popped the vial of dreamless sleep onto the nightstand. Concentrating on the present, Marvolo lightly shook his son to wake him.

“Henry. Son, wake up.”

Rubbing at his eyes, the teen reluctantly left sleep behind and started blinking in the dim lighting from only a few candles on the desk.

“Mhhh…”

Marvolo chuckled at the obvious reluctance to awake.

“Here, drink this, it will ensure you get the rest you need.”

And without really registering what was happening, still mostly asleep, Henry drank the potion and, settling back into the pillows, slipped back into sleep right away.

Covering his son with the thin sheet – it was too warm to sleep under anything heavier – Marvolo stood to leave for the house in Edinburgh. He had some things to prepare, before he could start to punish a traitor.

OOOOO0000
Albus watched, sitting in his plush and comfortable chair at the head of the table, as one after the other, all members of the Order arrived at their new meeting place.

He had spent quite some time searching in the last two days to find a place as well suited to this task as Grimmauld Place was. Such a pity that Sirius had thrown them out. He had been too careless in his handling of the man. It could not be helped. At least not at the moment. Maybe it would be different once the trial was over and Sirius got a taste of what it meant to be a Lord. All the boring and tedious work that he would have to do. The adventure of being an Order member could be exactly what the young man would need after a few weeks of being a responsible adult.

Or maybe he would reconsider accepting the teaching position for Defence against the Dark Arts that Albus had offered more than once already. The man had declined, saying that he would need all his time to concentrate on his duties as Lord Black. Returning the estates to order, getting up to date with the Wizengamot. The old wizard was not sure if this was what Sirius had planned, or if he just used these so-called plans as a diversion. He still needed to find a teacher, or risk the Ministry appointing one. Sirius would certainly prefer to stay close to his godson as a teacher, over boring paperwork.

At least he could hope.

Molly was distributing plates with homemade cookies on them on the big carved oak table, chatting nervously with the others that were already seated around it. He was glad that he had not lost the Weasleys. As their children were friends of Harry's, he still had some measure of control over what the boy would be doing at Hogwarts.

Because this was the first real, big meeting they had had since Sirius had decided that he would no longer trust the Headmaster, there were quite a few items on the agenda. They only were waiting for Severus to arrive. Filling the time with gossip and idle chatter.

And only moments later, said man walked through the door, his usual sneer firmly in place, robes in his customary black swinging around his legs. Albus nodded curtly to his spy, assessing the state the man was in. He could not see any limp, or other signs of injury, and the Potions Master did not appear to be overly tired. He was curious what his turned Death Eater would have to tell.

Calling the gathering to order, Albus prepared to start the meeting.

“Welcome to our new headquarters. We have not met in a while, so let us start right now.” He turned to Molly. “You were in Diagon Alley today. Please, can you tell us how our dear Harry is coping with the situation.” He smiled grandfatherly and his eyes twinkled merrily. He would get the whole situation under control again.

“Yes, well,” a flustered Molly began the tale of the afternoon. “The kids got invitations for ice cream. We meet at Fortescue’s.” She nervously ordered her red curls “Harry and You-Know-Who came from the Leaky Cauldron, both dressed in fine and new robes. Harry still looks much too thin, but he was smiling.”

“Probably happy to meet his friends again,” Interjected Dodge.

That got many different reactions from around the table. Severus was sneering, clearly not happy with the way Molly conducted her report, Moody observed all that was going on with a grim expression, the others expressed their agreement to this statement in different ways.

“You-Know-Who was polite, and he seems to care about Harry. I...” Molly blushed. If it was a reaction to the charming man she probably had met, or her embarrassment over the whole situation,
was not clear to Albus.

“Harry mostly listened to the others telling of their summer. But he showed a family tree. Showing that Lily was a distant relative of the Slytherin family.”

Alastor leaned forward in his chair, fixing his normal eye on Molly. “I saw the parchment.” He turned to Albus. “It seemed to be genuine.”

Albus nodded his head, projecting deep contemplation. This certainly was something he had not thought possible. The young witch he had met, a descendant of Slytherin. He never would have guessed. How many other witches and wizards, seemingly born of muggles, were related to old, well-known families? And what were Tom’s plans concerning this information?

“So it is not likely that we will get Harry away from Tom again on this angle.” He caressed his white beard and nodded at Alastor, so he would continue his report.

“They were followed by two wizards. Crabbe and Goyle, if I am not mistaken. A good thing they were. There were many angry glares sent in their direction,” Moody gruffly stated, his blue magical eye swirling like mad in all directions. “They stayed, watching the perimeter.”

“It almost felt like we were on duty together,” Tonks added with a shudder. “That was really creepy.” Her hair changed from the bubbly pink it had been, to a muddy green, and back to an angry red.

Smiling at her, Albus congratulated himself over his new acquisitions for the Order. Two from the younger Aurors, an impressive catch, in his opinion at least.

“So he is concerned for Harry’s safety. To protect him from all those that could voice opinions about his being heir of Slytherin, and probably to thwart rescue plans from our side, as well as escape attempts from Harry.” Albus could see that Alastor did not totally agree, but the others needed these little reassurances that Voldemort – or Tom like he liked to call him – still was the evil man they knew him to be.

“Severus, can you tell us something new?” Albus finally came to the item on the agenda he thought to be the most pressing one.

“I can,” was the short, clipped answer.

Good Severus, always effective in his reports, always so impatient for the reports of the others to come to an end.

“At the moment, I’m brewing several potions for the Dark Lord that Potter will have to take.” Raising the volume of his voice slightly, Severus spoke over the murmur that started, “Strong nutrition potions, long- and slow-acting healing potions, pain-relief potions, and Dreamless Sleep.” His glare stopped the speculations about potions to control people and others of equally malicious intent.

“Furthermore, the Dark Lord makes the brat study.” A sadistic smirk made its appearance on the pale face, saddening Albus and reassuring him. Obviously the Potions Master had not changed his attitude towards Harry, and if he did not change this, only caring for the boy’s safety because of his guilt over Lily’s death, he probably had not changed at all and was still firmly on Albus’ side.

“I have to teach him potions. As you all know, he will study History, and as far as I know, he gets tuition on ancient runes together with one of my Slytherins.”
“Do you know of Tom’s plans for Harry? Or his plans in general?”

Murmurs from the others made Severus sneer again. The seemingly uninterested drawl was thick in his voice.

“Judging by the time he invests in getting the boy a respectable education, I would guess that the Dark Lord wants the boy to be his heir. Concerning his general plans, I can only speculate. He is interested in the state of the population. I have to research potions linked to procreation and mental health. There have not been many meetings with all of us. So I do not know much about what the others do.”

Alastor gave the younger wizard a calculating look, he never had trusted the reformed Death Eater. Something Albus only reprimanded him for now and then. In fact he was quite glad to have another person keeping Severus’ guilt alive, and an eye on the man.

Someone that had changed his allegiance once was likely to do so again. Better to be careful.

Severus looked like he wanted to roll his eyes, but refrained. “I know that there is much research going on, and some have been sent to search for Karkaroff.”

“So he’s still on the run?” slurred Mundungus from his place at the edge of the group, sitting in his cloud of whiskey and stale smoke.

“I didn’t think he would last this long.” drawled Alastor, full of contempt.

Several others expressed their astonishment with eager nods and exclamations, echoing Alastor’s words. Albus kept a close eye on his spy, trying to see if the young man worried about being found out.

But Severus showed only his usual disdain for the company present, and his collected and attentive front blocked out all that he might be thinking.

Just as Albus shifted his attention back to the rest of the Order, he saw Severus flinch and grab at his forearm, drawing a sharp breath.

All attention quickly was on the Potions Master, the room in Albus’ old childhood home was suddenly so quiet, that one could have heard the sound of a doxy’s sneezing.

Ignoring the stares of all the others, Severus stood, gathering his robes around him, and looked over to his employer.

“I have to go, Headmaster,” he nodded to Albus, swept his gaze over the assembled members of the Order, and left quickly through the door to the hall.

A quick look assured Albus that most of the Order was concerned over the fact that Severus Snape was on his way to Voldemort. The ancient wizard was sure that Molly was concerned for the professor’s safety, and that his old friend Alastor did not trust Severus, despite Albus’ frequent reassurances.

The silence following Severus’ exit did not last long.

“After Sirius is free again, can’t we use his name and the fact that Harry’s grandmother on his father’s side was a Black, to shift the guardianship from You-Know-Who to Sirius?” The other young Auror, Kingsley, brought the discussion back on track.
Quickly forgetting his spy on his way to another meeting and the dangers entailed in getting in contact with Tom, Albus focused on discussing plans to thwart the plans of their enemy.

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Severus breathed deeply once he had left the old and derelict house at the outskirts of Godric’s Hollow. He was not happy that the Headmaster had chosen this house as the new headquarters of the order. At the moment it was not under the fidelius, but the Potions Master suspected that this would change during the course of the remaining evening. The only improvement over the house in London was that the mutt had not been present at this meeting.

As it was unwise to be late, even if the last one now was not punished automatically on entering, Severus quickly turned on his heel, apparating to his home in Spinner’s End.

Summoning his robes and mask, rather than entering the house, Severus was quickly clad in his Death Eater garb and apparated, concentrating on the low burning sensation of the mark on his arm.

It really was a handy piece of magic, the Dark Mark. And now that it was not visible the whole time, it had become really useful. Apparating to a place he had not seen before had demanded quite a bit of trust and courage the first few times he had followed the call of his Lord. Now it was like second nature.

Only stumbling slightly as he appeared on the path up to an old and neglected house, hearing the traffic from a muggle street through the wards, Severus quickly righted himself and walked up to the door. He never had been to this place, but he got the impression that he had seen another house like it. He passed the wards keyed to the Mark on his arm, as he heard two near-silent cracks behind him. So this was a bigger meeting, the third one since the Dark Lord had returned.

Severus made his way through the front door and down a dark hallway, with spots where portraits had been taken down, and into a rather generous parlour. All the furniture had been removed, and the floor was bare, as the big carpet that probably had covered it was lying rolled up near one of the walls.

The Dark Lord was standing on a dais, before a grand throne-like chair at the short far wall. There was a big door, closed, behind the waiting dark wizard, and some of the others were already standing in the room, waiting. Severus spotted his friend Lucius – the way he stood was too obvious, even if they were all wearing the same robes – and quickly walked to the dais, to bow to his Lord.

After he rose again and got a small nod from his Lord, Severus went over to stand by his friend. He shot him a questioning look, and got a small shake of the other’s head in response. So Lucius did not think an explanation about the meeting to take place was wise at the moment.

They didn’t have to wait long as, one after the other, all Death Eaters came through the door, walked up to their Lord, bowed, and found a place to stand in the growing crowd.

While waiting, Severus looked around, trying to determine why this house had a familiar feel to it.
As his thoughts turned to possible ways the Dark Lord had come to use this house, to even ward it so that only those marked by him could enter, he finally made the connection.

This house shared a décor and the feeling of its ancient wards with the former headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. What an irony. Smirking slightly to himself, Severus turned his attention to the possible reasons why they all had been called to the house and this meeting.

He didn't have much time to ponder the question, as soon the last wizard – Goyle, if Severus was not mistaken – had arrived and their Lord started to speak.

“My dear loyal servants. I have called you here tonight to let you take part in punishing one that has betrayed us all.” His dramatic pause left enough time for the door behind him to open slowly, creaking ominously.

Two Death Eaters, Severus would have guessed that they were the Carrows, were dragging a third person into the room. The man between them had seen better days, and it took the Potions Master a moment to identify him.

A thrill of fear washed through Severus as the realisation hit him that this could have been him, the moment he recognized Karkaroff. If his Lord had not given him the opportunity to prove his loyalty, redeem himself, then it would have been him dragged into the middle of a circle, at the mercy of the merciless. He was really glad in this moment that his Lord had adopted Harry Potter, and therefore he was able to fulfil his oath and promise to Lily, and stay loyal to the Dark Lord at the same time.

“I have called you so we can punish the traitor for his transgressions, make him suffer as he made us suffer, to show him and all that might be tempted that we will not idly watch when our cause is betrayed.”

All assembled shuddered under the intense magic emanating from their Lord, engulfing the whole room. Their looks concentrated on the bound man, pushed into a kneeling position before their Lord by his two guards.

Severus was sure that they all remembered the few times someone was punished by all of them for a big mistake. But they had never had to punish a traitor this way. There never was anyone caught in the act who did not die immediately at the wand of their Dark Lord.

Said man now cast a cruciatus on the kneeling former Headmaster of Durmstrang, almost as if he wasn't really paying attention, as if the man he was torturing was not worth his time. Within seconds the man fell to the ground, writhing in his bonds, trying not to scream.

Lifting the curse and shoving the whimpering man from the dais, so he fell with a thunk to the lower floor, the Dark Lord let his gaze wander over his assembled followers, smiling an evil smirk.

“Each of you gets to give him a part of his punishment. Get creative! And do not kill him... yet!”

Severus watched as the man went to sit on his throne, a smug smile on his relaxed face, waving his hand lazily at them.

“Begin!”

There was no hesitation, as the order in which they would get a go was a preordained one,
rehearsed on more than one occasion, when they got to torture prisoners after they had given all the information they possible could give.

Severus was unsure how he felt about this. He thought that the Dark Lord was the best to bring the changes so dearly needed in their world, and he knew that their goals were unlikely to be reached by always being nice. But torture was never something Severus relished, unlike some of the others. And Igor Karkaroff had done nothing to him that would help him to feel anger and a need for retribution.

To his immense relief the Dark Lord spoke to him, over the screams of the man targeted by several bone-breaking curses from Lucius. “Severus, please assist Malcolm in making sure our traitor does not escape his punishment before it is over.”

Now no longer required to take an active part in the punishment, Severus stepped up to the other man, their healer, wand at the ready and closely watching what was cast on the man on the floor.

They all were being creative, as demanded.

Rowle held Karkaroff under the tickling charm for over a minute, making the man gasp for breath, writhing on the floor, to try and escape the tickling that made him laugh, even as he was whimpering in pain from the injuries he had accumulated since the start of the punishment.

Macnair cast a spell that conjured many insects and other small, many-legged animals, bed bugs, spiders, fire ants, crawling into the man’s nose, his ears, his mouth, making him scream and flail in his quest to get rid of them.

After the male Carrow had freed Igor from the little pests with fire, Malcolm called for the first halt in the punishment. Karkaroff had lost consciousness and they needed to check on him. A few healing spells and potions later, Malcolm cast an enervate on the traitor, stepping back to let the others continue.

Severus watched as, one after the other, the Death Eaters stepped forward, cast curses on the traitor, and retreated again. More than once a chill made its way down his spine as he could not prevent the thought that it could have been him, screaming until his voice gave out, bleeding on the hardwood floor, healed repeatedly only to be tortured again.

Nott, the last in the line of torturers, used an aguamenti to make Karkaroff believe he was going to drown, before stepping back.

The first round so finished, they all turned their eyes to the Dark Lord, who was lounging in his throne, a devilish smirk on his handsome face framed with his carefully styled hair.

They all waited for their Lord to cast the last curse and kill the traitor, to tell them to start another round, or to grant the honour of the killing blow to someone else.

“Malcolm, patch him up, and let Alecto and Amycus help you take him down to the cells.” The smirk morphed into the most evil and delighted smile Severus had ever seen on his Lord’s face.

“Remember, all of you, traitors will beg for death long before they will be granted their wish.” With elegant poise the Dark Lord rose and took a few steps that carried him over to where Malcolm was bent over the injured man, working quickly and efficiently on patching him up enough so that he wouldn't die from the damage inflicted.
“Thank you all for providing such wonderful entertainment. Enjoy the rest of the night.” Dismissed, the Death Eaters bowed as one and started to leave.

Severus got up from his bow to leave and report to Albus when he was called back by his Lord.

“Xerxes, Severus, stay.”

Feeling more relaxed than he had in days, Marvolo walked with a spring in his step from the parlour he had changed into the meeting hall to the study he had claimed as his. He certainly needed a way to decompress and combat the stress of conforming to the rules of society. He surely had neglected to practice enough in the last years he had had a body. Now he had to pay the price.

Severus and Xerxes were following him, silent and a few steps behind, as he opened the door and went to sit in the padded chair behind the desk.

“Have a seat,” Marvolo invited them to sit.

They both took one of the chairs facing the desk, removing their masks as they did so. Severus had a carefully blank face, quite obviously hiding what he was feeling and thinking.

It seemed his Potions Master was affected by witnessing the torture. Thinking back over the raids and meetings of the past, it was clear the man never had revelled in the torture as the others did. Well, Marvolo did not need aggressive and cruel people, he needed smart followers with connections and skills that contributed to his goals. He wondered where this left many of his current followers. And those rotting away in Azkaban because they had been loyal to him. The Dark Lord sighed, he needed to think about this and come up with a solution, and soon.

Xerxes was more relaxed. As one of those that had known him as a boy, it was only logical that he would be more at ease in his presence.

Resisting the urge to yawn – he really needed a good night’s sleep – Marvolo gave his old school friend a more or less kind smile. Practice makes perfect.

“Did you know that your sister had a son, Xerxes?” he asked idly, watching his friend's face closely for a reaction.

Lord Lestrange blinked a few times and then answered, “I have not heard from her since I was a little boy of ten years. She was sent off to a girls' school when she turned eleven.” The wizard with greying hair took a deep breath. “So no, I did not know she had a son. Why do you ask, Marvolo?”

Said man smirked, he had hoped that Xerxes would be fast in picking up when to call him by his name rather than his title. It seemed he had been right.

“The son married and had a daughter.” He folded his hands and got more comfortable in his seat. “The young girl is in Henry’s year, and a friend of his.”

The dumbfounded look on Xerxes Lestrange’s face was too hilarious, in fact it was humorous
enough to actually make Marvolo chuckle quietly.

“My sister’s granddaughter is a witch?”

Taking pity on the man – it was a rather big shock to be told that a squib family member had magical descendants after all – Marvolo started on a more thorough explanation.

“Henry met with his friends today, and told them about the ancestry test I had him take. His friend, Hermione Granger, went to test the theory that all so-called muggle-born witches and wizards in fact have some magical ancestors. Just as Henry’s mother was a distant relative of mine.”

Seeing that the family patriarch was not able to form questions right now, Marvolo did not wait for him to say anything but kept talking. “I have seen the tree, and recognized the names of your parents. I offered to introduce her to her wizarding family, but frankly, she was not thrilled.”

“Why ever not?” asked Xerxes, upset over this slight.

Giving the questioning look from Severus a tiny nod, the Potions Master answered the question.

“She thinks of herself as a muggle-born witch, and only heard of the Lestrange family in connection with blood purity and the attack on the Longbottoms. She is a Gryffindor, and certainly biased in her view of families usually considered dark.”

Xerxes sighed. “Of course, you are right.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes briefly. “What shall I do?” the oldest-looking man in the room asked his school friend, seeming lost. “There is a young witch that could carry on my family name, the family line, and she hates us, without ever having spoken to any of us?”

Marvolo raised a brow. “You truly do not think that I will keep my word and get my loyal followers out of Azkaban?”

“To imply this was not my intention, my Lord.”

Marvolo was impressed, Xerxes really was quick in learning the nuances of their relationship.

“But I do not hope that my sons will be able to walk in the open again. And because of this, every child they might still have in the future cannot be heir.” There was a decidedly sad undertone in Xerxes’ words.

“Well, I am working on this problem. But you should not give up hope so soon. I have Lucius searching for laws to get you some influence over her. Maybe a sort of sponsorship, like your father offered me in sixth year?” He tried an encouraging smile and was rewarded with a knowing smirk.

“The girl is certainly too curious for her own good. Running to Gringotts in the middle of a visit with a friend, to satisfy her need to know? I don’t think that she can resist temptation if you promise knowledge or help in getting it.”

His Lord’s calm words visibly helped Xerxes to put the news into perspective and to see the promise of opportunity and ways to manipulate the situation to his benefit.

“Severus has been her teacher for the last four years, he certainly can help you to get a feeling for the girl’s personality.” Both men acknowledged the implied order with a curt nod.

Marvolo’s gaze fell onto a letter from Yaxley that had arrived as he had been preparing the house to be the future meeting place for him and his followers.
Nodding to Xerxes, Marvolo dismissed him with a few last kindly spoken words. “I will keep you informed about everything I might learn about your grandniece from my son. And, of course, about any and all laws that you can use to get some control over the youngest member of your family.”

With a low bow Lord Lestrange left the study, closing the door softly behind him.

“How does your work progress, Severus?” Time to reassure his Potions Master, by emphasizing his usefulness. It was easy to see that the punishment for the traitor had rattled the man’s composure.

“I have gathered all ingredients I will need, and have brewed a first version of both potions. They need adjustment, but I have ideas on how to proceed. At the moment I am pondering ways to test their effects once I am reasonably sure that they should do what they are intended to do.” Back on familiar and comfortable ground, the dark-haired young wizard started to relax ever so slightly.

“Please add the costs for all you need to the bill for Henry’s potions.” Briefly contemplating the letter and its contents, Marvolo came to a decision. “Make the potion to veil past memories your priority. I will need it as soon as you can finish it. Please inform me of what you need in test subjects, and I will see to it that you get them.”

Severus nodded to this and seemed reluctant to leave, even if he clearly had heard the dismissal in Marvolo’s tone.

“There is more you want to speak about?”

“Yes, my Lord.” The young dark-eyed wizard swallowed. “I was in an Order meeting when your call came. How do you want me to continue there? Dumbledore clearly thinks of me as loyal to him, and as his spy. I can continue to play this role and spy on him for you, my Lord.”

Nodding slowly, the red-eyed man touched his chin with the tips of interlocked fingers. “It would be unfortunate if he came to suspect your return to your rightful family. I know you are adept in this role, keep the information you feed him vague, centred around Henry and my treatment of him. The lessons you will give him. Maybe my quest to regain my OWLs and the act of gaining the trust of those that claimed I had them under the Imperius before my fall all those years ago.” The nodding got more decisive. “Yes, that would be best. If there is something I do want you to give them, I will say so. Please write reports whenever something interesting comes up. I trust you can sort the information by priority.”

As an afterthought – Severus had almost reached the door – Marvolo added in a soft voice, barely above a whisper, “I have found the reason for my odd moods.”

Turning quickly, dark eyes full of curiosity fixed on the man with his dark brown waves of hair, looking down onto the top of the desk before him.

“The night I failed to kill my son, there was a mental connection forged between us. The fact that I have a body again, and that my son and I are in such close proximity to one another seems to intensify the interaction between us. I will have to research to find a way to dissolve the bond. But in the meantime, we need a way to live with the connection.”

Red eyes rose to meet black ones.

“Would you be willing to teach Henry Occlumency? I know of only three people that are good enough Legilimens to teach the art. I do not want Dumbledore to teach my son, not that he would if I asked. It is also highly unlikely that Henry would be willing to let me teach him, let alone trust me enough to be even able to learn from me. So that leaves you as the only option.”
Marvolo worked hard to keep it a question and not an order. Normally someone wanting to learn this obscure art of magic did so on his own. Not because it could not be taught, but rather because there seldom was a master of the art around to learn from. Learning on one's own was slow going, and that was not really an option for Henry. As the boy would need the ability to protect his mind as soon as humanly possible, he had to have a teacher.

But given the history between Severus and Henry, forcing them to work together in this would not work out well.

“ I will have to think about this, my Lord,” was the Potions Master’s cautious reply, before he bowed and left the study.

Finally alone and able to let his mask down, Marvolo yawned and stretched to work some kinks out of his back.

Hopefully Severus would finish the potion quickly. Yaxley had found a young wizard living in the streets of London, probably after he had run away from home, who needed help. And fast. It was rather shocking, that the Ministry did nothing to help those magical children who were stuck in the muggle world, being treated like dirt, cast out and miserable. The faster the potion was ready, the faster he could send some of his best hunters to retrieve the boy. And then he could see to it that the child found a home with one of the families that could not get any more children.

But now, he yawned again, he should head to bed and sleep. Everything else would have to wait for at least eight hours. He looked forward to a nice bed with fresh linen blankets. He apparated on the spot, bending the wards to his will, and shortly after walked the way to his guest room in Benjamin’s house. Time for some long-needed sleep.

In a dingy and dark cell, reeking of decomposing seaweed and fish, sat a woman with matted dark hair, a pale complexion, and not only because she had not seen the sun in years, holding her left arm cradled to her chest.

A fleeting smile graced her features, and with closed eyes she clung to the feeling of the Mark burning a few hours ago.

This had been the third time in what felt like only a few weeks. Or maybe days? She only was sure it had been a short time between the calls of her Lord. He was back, finally back. Back and planning to get his most loyal out of this never-dry prison, on this gods forsaken island amidst waves of the salty sea.

Only a short while now, and she would be free again. Free to hunt down the filth on this world, to serve her Lord and prove her worth.

Desperately trying to cling to this positive feeling, she started to shudder in her faded grey rags, as the dark gliding shapes of their guards came closer to her cell, feeling the positive emotions coming out of it, sucking them up.

The Dementors tended to stick by those that had still some good thoughts left, even if they were
supposed to stay closer to those in the high-security cells. After over ten years of imprisonment, there was not much to get from the prisoners there.

Shivering, the chattering of her teeth and the crushing of the waves against the island the only sounds, she waited. Waited for the moment she would be free again. Waited for the smallest opportunity to get back to her Lord.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the comments! I love to read ideas, speculation, and what you think should be added. More often than not those spark new ideas in my head for the story.

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Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
It was Sunday the 16th of July and Xerxes Lestrange was sitting in his study, tiredly staring at a blank parchment.

After the meeting with his Lord and follow Death Eaters, Xerxes had invited Severus Snape over to his manor, to ask the man for information on his grandniece. It had been an instructive and interesting meeting. The young witch was a stubborn Gryffindor and a very bright student or at least so Severus thought.

What a mess.

He had tried to stop his sons to go with Bella’s plan. But he had no success in stopping that fools errant and so both his sons had been apprehended, charged for their crimes, found guilty and thrown into Azkaban.

Since this day he was living alone in the enormous, old house he had inherited together with the title of Lord Lestrange.

He was to old to marry again and have more children. So many years ago, he had accepted that he would be the last Lord Lestrange and that the family would die once his sons succumbed to the horrors of the wizarding prison.

And now her she was. A spark of hope that not all was lost. But also the real fear, that all efforts would be in vain, because Xerxes trusted in Snape’s assessment of his student, as a passionate young woman, proud to be born of muggle parents and opposed to the old families solely on the grounds of their bias and discrimination against children of her background.

Not for the first time the current Lord Lestrange cursed his parents for sending his sister away. Smiling despite his mood, he remembered the many pranks they had played in this very halls, the many times they had gotten into mischief in the potions garden, the kitchen or the forest surrounding the grounds. They had been only a year apart, getting along better than most siblings he knew of, inseparable in many ways.

And then had come the year that his sister should have received her Hogwarts letter. But it never came. He still could remember how sad his sister had been. The bright girl that had learned so fast and easy, crushed under the expectations of their parents, crying herself to sleep. And he, the younger brother, helpless and bewildered trying to console her.

Now, looking back at the years of his carefree childhood, he could see the worry of their parents, the fact that Dorcas never had shown any signs of magic, even as he started to use his own on an almost regular basis.

Their parents had decided to send Dorcas away, to a good school in the muggle world, together with other bright girls without magic, to learn in an environment where she would not be an outcast, a failure. They had tried to sell it as something good, a mercy. Xerxes had disagreed and not spoken to them for months after Dorcas had left.

He never understood why his sister had to be hidden away. At least not until he started his education at Hogwarts. Peer pressure had done quick work of his innocence and naivety. Squibs
were ridiculed and bullied by his classmates and not only the ones from so called “dark” families. And even those families claiming to be “light” and the epitome of “good” watched those born without access to magic with pity.

His proud and incredibly intelligent sister would not have been able to live with that.

For years he had tried to forget and live his life. Now he wished that he had kept in contact with Dorcas, even if it got harder with each letter, send against his parents’ order, to connect, as they had been living in so different worlds.

This was the second hint in short time that the problem with muggle-born children was a home made one. There would have to be many changes to combat this. First of all they would need to change the way Squibs were seen.

He sighed, getting the quill from its resting place, casting a look around himself, the dark wood shelves filled with the books of the family chronicle, he would have to search for others that had been cast out, but first he had a letter to write. He tipped the quill in the ink and started to write.

_**Dear Miss Granger,**_

*I am aware that we have not meet before, and that this letter is a breach of protocol, but I feel the circumstances warrant this unusual move on my part.*

*Yesterday, Lord Slytherin informed me, that my late sister was your grandmother. You maybe can imagine my surprise, but probably not the hope this brought to me.*

*After our parents send her away, I had little to no contact with Dorcas. I am intrigued with the possibility to learn about her life and to get to know her son and granddaughter and daughter in law.*

*I would ask to meet with you and your parents, Miss Granger, at a time and place at your family’s convenience.*

*In hope of future friendly interactions*

*Lord Xerxes Caius Lestrange*

Sealing the letter and giving it to an elf to be send, Xerxes summoned the latest book from the chronicle to the desk. Time to search for more family members that had been robbed of their rights and cast out into the muggle world.

_oooOOooo_

Snuggling deeper under his covers, Harry tried to go back to sleep. But with the sun shining
brightly into his room it was harder than he would have liked. Debating if he just should give up and get out of bed, he startled as something heavy suddenly rested on his legs.

.:Are you awake yet, little one?:.

Harry yawned and sat up.

.:Now I am. Why are you here?:. The teen wanted to know.

Slithering her way up the bed, over Harry’s legs, until Nagini could rise to be level with the teenager, the big snake flicked her tongue out and answered the question.

.:Master said he would be sleeping until the sun is on its highest point. But I want company today, so I made him let me in as he brought this flat thing:.:

She jabbed her head in the direction of the night stand, and following her motion with his eyes Harry spotted a folded parchment, probably addressed to him, pinned under his water glass.

First reaching for his glasses, he still marvelled how much better he could see with them, Harry then sat back against the headboard comfortably, to read the note.

Just as he had suspected it was addressed to him and written in the hand of Voldemort, or so he guessed. After all, he just had seen some papers lying about the man’s desk, they could have been written by someone else.

While Harry unfolded the note, Nagini slithered down to the floor and into a patch of bright sunlight. .:Get me, when you leave to hunt for food:. she hissed content, soaking up the warmth.

A little apprehensive Harry started to read.

Henry,

as I have missed two nights of sleep, I will have to catch up on it today. Do not expect me to be around before lunch.

I suggest you dedicate part of the morning to your summer assignments. I expect to see at least an outline for one of your essays this afternoon.

We will discuss the past evening then, after a lesson on the etiquette needed for tomorrow’s events. It would not do for you to embarrass either our family or your godfather.

Marvolo

PS: Nagini insists on keeping you company. Do not let her boss you around.

The last sentence was a bit sloppier than the rest. Maybe the man had added it standing in the
corridor, or bent over the desk in the corner.

Sighing a little put out by the delay, Harry had to acknowledge, that he had not been up to an explanation the night before. He did not even remember how he had made it into his bed. He flushed red with embarrassment as he realised that Voldemort probably had moved him here.

Quickly making his way over to the enormous wardrobe, almost tripping over the blankets during his hasty departure from the bed, he grabbed fresh clothes and made for the bathroom. He wanted to shower and get rid of the sweat from the night, along with the smell of the herbs that had been burned during the ritual of the evening before. Getting out of the ridiculous shirt he still was wearing, was a bonus.

Almost half an hour later Harry emerged from the bathroom, dressed in comfortable clothes, covered with a lightweight robe in a vibrant caribbean blue tone. He smiled at the snoring snake, curled up in a sunny spot on the floor.

It was almost too easy to forget that this huge snake was the familiar of the most evil wizard of recent times.

As he walked over the wooden floor, the snake was alerted to his movements by the vibrations he caused, and moved her head to look at him.

.:Ready to leave, little one?:.

Harry huffed a laugh .:I am heavier than you. It seems funny you calling me little:.

.:I will stick with young if you find little too funny. Lets leave. I am getting bored. I wish the funny rat was still here. Chasing him was always fun:. 

At this Harry was not sure whether to laugh or shudder. Imagining the large snake chasing a transformed Wormtail was funny and unsettling all at once.

They left the room heading for breakfast.

Following the order, he did not one moment think it was a suggestion, to do his homework, Harry spent most of the morning sitting in the school room, working on his potions essay. He searched for the information he would need to answer the question, and noted points he did not know on a different sheet of parchment, so he could ask the professor for advice in the next tutoring lesson.

If he was forced to spend time over the summer, learning potions and being in the company of his least favourite teacher, he would take full advantage of the fact.

Theodore kept him company, working on his runes essay and some letters his father made him write for practice.

After they had finished their tasks, the Slytherin boy took the Gryffindor out to the gardens and to a secluded spot under some trees, to chat about Harry’s visits to the houses belonging to the Potter family the day before. After that they started on Hogwarts gossip and news from the quidditch league.

Nagini never leaving Harry’s side, provided some comments to almost everything. More than once
Harry burst out laughing and had to translate for the other boy’s benefit.

Also it was a nice day, and he felt good for having a part of his homework done, Harry had troubles to keep his thought on the moment and away from the ritual and the result of it. He remembered the little conversation he had had with Voldemort after it had been finished. The man had said that his theory had been proven right.

But what did it mean? And what had been the cause of the sounds and voices he had heard before sleep had claimed him? Or had he dreamed that part? He fervently wished that the talk scheduled for the afternoon was already over. Or would never come. He was torn. He hoped it was nothing bad. But knowing his luck, he did not dare to hope.

oooOOooo

Unable to find true sleep, Hermione had gotten up at the first hints of dawn. After she had made herself a simple sandwich in the kitchen, avoiding Kreacher, she went to the library determined to find what she could about the family of Lestrange.

Her family.

It felt strange to know that her grandmother had been a Squib. That she had family that was magical. She wondered what would have happened if her grandmother had kept in contact with her brother. Would she have grown up knowing about magic? Would she be looking down on supposed muggle-born witches and wizards? Would she be in Slytherin and considered dark?

Hermione really hoped that she would not be much different if she had grown up knowing her ancestry. But she was realistic enough to suspect, that live would have been very different, and therefore she would have grown up to be different to.

Hermione was bend over some back issues from the Daily Prophet, she had found them in one of the lower shelves at the back of the small library, reading about the trials for the Lestrange brothers, the wife of one, a former Black by the name of Bellatrix, and Bartemius Crouch Junior, as Ron and the twins came in.

“Here you are” “Hermione” exclaimed the twins with exaggerated looks of happiness.

“Where else.” Muttered Ron, rolling his eyes, not low enough not to be heard.

One of the twins took a chair from the table next to Hermione, turned it to face the other direction and sat down, folding his arms atop the backrest. The other twin placed his hands on the table and leaned over it to read the article Hermione had her eyes fixed on.

“What depressing reading for a morning” “as nice as today.”

Hermione looked up at the twins and noticed they were wearing an unusual solemn expression.

“I need to learn what I can about … them.” She was not able to call them family out loud. After
what she had found Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrange had done, how they had tortured poor Neville’s parents, she was not sure if she ever would be willingly calling them family.

“Found something positive?” Asked the twin sitting beside her, she really wished she could tell them apart.

Ignored by his brothers and his friend, Ron huffed and dropped into a chair by the door. With a roll of his eyes he watched Hermione take a book from one of her stacks.

“Our books I have found here are rather limited on family history related to families other than Black.” She sighed unhappy. “I had hoped to find something more. There are a few mentions of someone of the name of Lestrange, but mostly it is …” She trailed off, playing unhappily with the pages of the book before her.

“I would emigrate to Australia, if I was related to such a dark family. Really, there is nothing worse. The whole family is rotten.” Ron butted in, disgust clear on his face.

Shocked, Hermione slowly rose from her seat by the book laden table, wide eyes fixed on her red-haired friend. With tears welling up, she rushed from the room, hurt by Ron’s words and his open disgust at the idea of being related to the family Lestrange.

As the girl stormed up the stairs to the room she shared with Ginny, Fred and George turned to their younger brother, dark looks on their faces.

“You are an idiot little brother.” “And an insensitive prat.”

Seeing the bewildered look of the younger Weasley boy, they sighed and shook their heads synchronously.

“You just said, that you hate anyone of the family Lestrange.” Fred explained, while his brother nodded his head in beat to his twin’s words.

Confused, Ron looked from one of the twins to the other. “And? Where is the problem? They are dark wizards, most of them in Azkaban!”

“Hermione is related to them.” “And not too distantly either.”

Horrified, Ron paled so his freckles stood out against his skin, his mouth gaping, standing there trying to comprehend how he could have hurt his friend. She was a Granger after all.

With a funny feeling in his stomach, Harry walked to the study Lord Nott had relinquished to his summer guest, following Voldemort after their joined lunch.

He hoped that he would be able to concentrate during the first part of the talk. It was difficult to comprehend how fast the day for Sirius’ trial had approached. Tomorrow his godfather would be cleared of the crimes he had been imprisoned for, and Harry would be there, giving his support. So it was important that he paid attention to the lecture about manners he was sure to receive in a few
moments.

But the looming prospect of learning about the strange link between himself and Voldemort threatened to distract him. Harry took a few calm and deep breaths. He had read about a few breathing exercises from the muggle book on meditation Voldemort was forcing him to read. They had proven useful in the last days, as they made falling asleep much easier.

Approaching the study door, it opened seemingly on its own accord and closed with a soft click behind them, once they were inside.

The first thing catching Harry’s eye were a few clothes bags hanging in mid air.

“It seems your robes with the combined family colours have arrived.” Mused Voldemort, going over to the hovering bags, separating them to be able to open them.

Curious, Harry was still unsure how the tailor wanted to manage to combine red and green without making the robes look ridiculous, the teen approached and slit one of the bags of the robe inside.

Well, it seemed the tailor had not been able to pull it off after all. The green robe with red trim Harry had uncovered, looked remarkably like some Christmas decoration. But it was not only one robe floating there. So he moved on to the next bag, while Voldemort went over to the desk to sort through the stack of mail waiting for him there.

This robe was much like the other, just with the colours switched, so it was a red robe with green trim. He so was not going to wear this where anyone could see him.

One last chance.

Hoping the last robe of the batch was something Harry would like to wear, he opened the bag up and got the robe out. His eyes widened as he saw it. This one did not go with green and red as the main colours. It was a medium dark slate grey robe, with a lining that shimmered silver or gold, depending on the way he looked at it. On the outside there was embroidery done in deep smaragd green and vibrant dark red, depicting flames, in green, and snakes, in red, curling their way up all the seams and hems. With the family crests side by side, this was definitely the best of the three choices.

Harry felt the other wizard stepping up to him, looking at the three robes.

“Which one do you want?” Voldemort asked, eyeing the robes with the main colours green and red critically.

“I think this one is the best.” Harry answered, pointing at the mostly grey one, hanging to the right of the others. “I do not wish to look like some Christmas tree!” He scoffed.

Nodding in agreement, Voldemort summoned the rejected robes to his outstretched hand. “The family colours certainly do not mesh well. I approve of your choice.”

He turned and called for an elf “Flimm!”

With a soft pop the bubbly elf appeared in the study, bowing low to both wizards, with a fond smile for Harry and an empty but polite face for the red eyed wizard standing next to the teenager.

“Take this robe,” Voldemort held up the robe Harry had chosen, “to Henry’s room, and those two
back to the tailor.”

With a snap of his finger the elf vanished the robes, bowed deeply, brushing his bat like ears over the polished floor, and vanished himself with another soft pop.

“Come let us sit down, Henry.” Voldemort said, walking around the desk and sitting behind it. With the uneasiness returning full force, Harry complied and sat down in one of the surprisingly comfortable chairs in front of the desk.

Tea appeared between them and they both prepared a cup to their liking. Harry watched amused, and trying not to show it, as Voldemort added three whole heaped spoons of sugar to his one cup. The man had a serious sweet tooth. It was odd, that the wizard, who had killed Harry's parents and so many more, had some disturbingly human quirks.

And so a long and tedious lesson on proper manners for a courtroom and on the proceedings of a trial began.

Harry was shown and had to practice several bows, and how to greet a Lady. This last lesson was practiced with a dummy conjured by Voldemort, for which Harry was grateful. It was hard enough to pretend Voldemort was one of the Ministry Officials, trying to pretend he was a Lady, would have been impossible.

Not for the first time Harry noticed that Voldemort could be a decent teacher, if he wanted to be. The first time he had noticed, the man had explained the situation with the goblins and the ancestry tests. And now he was surprisingly patient, while Harry fumbled to get the bows right and to do them with some grace.

After the important matter of proper behaviour was covered, they moved on to the proceedings of the trial, so Harry would know what to expect.

Voldemort started with an explanation of the various types of courts. Tribunals in times of war, those that judged crimes, those that mediated between private parties. It was a little overwhelming for Harry.

They concentrated on the information concerning trials against criminals, even if there should have been a tribunal when Sirius first had been arrested.

Harry had trouble to follow the different parts and roles playing a part in the trial, he tried his best though, knowing that he would need to know all this information once he was of age and Lord Potter.

Other parts where logical and easy to understand. Like why he, if he had been old enough to hold the seat of the Noble House of Potter, would not be part of the jury as the injured party. And equally logical was that a theoretical Lord or Lady Black would not be part of the jury, because of the ties to the accused.

Voldemort explained that he was called to be witness in the trial, and therefore would not be part of the jury either.

Tea time had come and gone, and with it a snack provided by the Nott house elf, as they finally changed topics and came to the results of the ritual.
Trepidation returned full force, as Harry watched Voldemort getting two vials of slightly lavender coloured potion out of a drawer. He placed one on the desk in front of the teenager and opened the other to drink it on the spot.

“A calming draught, in case you need it.” Voldemort explained needlessly, setting the now empty vial down in front of him.

“What do you know about vows and oaths?” The man wanted to know, confusing Harry with this random change of topic.

“Not much?” was the hesitant answer.

Closing his ruby eyes, the dark wizard gave an exasperated sigh. And after opening his eyes again and seeing the slight pout on Harry’s face he shook his head. “Not your fault. So let me see.” He made a pause and gathered his thoughts.

“There are different vows and oaths as well as contracts a wizard or a witch can make. They are all binding in a way, some more, some less. There is for instance the unbreakable vow. Made between to people and witnessed by a bonder, this vow will kill the one breaking it. Most of the time one of the two people will be the one bond to the words of the vow and the only one suffering if the vow is broken.” He shoot Harry a short look to see, if he was still following, and Harry, also he still was confused what this had to do with the ritual and their strange link, nodded to signal he was listening.

“Then there are contracts. Those can have many different forms of punishment for breaking them. You could formulate a contract stating that if a specific secret is talked about without consent of all parties, the offender will be turned blue.”

The mental image of a wizard complete tinted blue made Harry snort, and a little of the tension vanished from his shoulders.

“Contracts tend to punish all signatories equally.”

Harry nodded, still unsure where this was heading.

“Similar to this, there is an implied family oath connected with the membership of one person to a house. So in effect you are subject to two magical oaths. One for the Slytherin family and one for the family of Potter. You are with me so far?”

“Yes, sir.” Harry nodded, he did not like the direction this was taking. He was under an oath, without his consent? No, he really did not like it.

“This oath can protect information that is shared in the family when explicitly shared under the protection of the oath. It will protect the information even if you should ingest veritaserum.” At Harry’s questioning look he sighed again and added an explanation.

“Veritaserum is the most effective truth serum, odour and tasteless, clear like water, highly toxic if not used correctly and highly regulated by the Ministry.”

Voldemort took a sip from his tea before he resumed his monologue.

“And the family oath will protect the information if someone should try to steal it out of your mind. It also will prevent you from telling anyone without the approval of the Head of House.”
Taking a deep breath Voldemort paused again, and Harry watched him with wary eyes. He was sure he would not like it. He shared everything with his friends, by the sound of it, he would not be able to share this. And he was sure he would want to share it, the build-up was just too much for it to be something unimportant.

“What I will tell you now, I tell you under the family oath of the Slytherin family.”

Harry was startled as the man before him suddenly looked down on his clasped hands. Such an unusual sight, he seemed unsure, something Harry had not seen before.

“You remember my little speech from the graveyard? Of course you do.” He sighed again, and Harry fidgeted in his chair. Where was this going?

“The way to immortality. When I was only little older than you are now, I feared nothing more than death. I found a book pointing out a way to defeat death, to become immortal. And in my youthful arrogance I disregarded all warnings in the text, concentrating on ensuring I would never have to fear death again.”

Red eyes locked with green ones. “Now I see that this was maybe my biggest mistake. On the day I came for you I had destabilization myself to the point, that the slightest actions could fracture me further. I had lost most of my reasoning ability, my focus, my magical strength. I was caught in paranoia. As I was blasted from my body there obviously was another break and the splinter of me, ripped from the rest, attached itself to you, to survive.”

They broke eye contact, Voldemort again looking at his hands, Harry staring at the teacup standing in front of him.

“So Professor Dumbledore was right.” whispered Harry.

The teen missed the others head snapping up. “What did the Headmaster say? And when?” Voldemort asked with a strange intensity in his voice.

“He told me after the thing with the basilisk, that on that night some of your power was transferred to me. He claimed it was the reason I can speak with snakes.” The raven haired teen shoot a questioning look at the wizard on the other side of the desk. His eyes widened at the fury he saw in the depths of the others eyes.

“He knows! Oh, this manipulating old bastard!”

Harry shrank back into the chair, frightened by the anger, even if it was not directed at himself. He watched as Voldemort started to breath in a deliberate manner, calming himself down again.

“The way I stayed bond to this plane after loosing my body, relies on parts of my soul to be sealed into different containers.” Voldemort spoke, fury shining through his words.

Harry’s breathing quickened, as he sensed where this was going, and with his gaze fixed on the edge of the desk he did not see the concerned glance that Voldemort shoot at him.

“I made more of them than anyone else. More than was prudent. And it seems I made you one, the night I tried to kill you.” He was speaking slowly and in a low voice, the fury all but gone.

“This is the reason for the connection between us. I do not know what the implications of a living container are. But I know that as long as at least one of those containers exist I cannot die.”

“How,” Harry cleared his throat because he was so hoarse that he was almost impossible to
understand, “how are they … how can they stop existing?” A fine tremble started to shake the teen.

Closing his eyes, a resigned expression on his face, Voldemort pinched the bridge of his nose. “The only ways I know of, end with the containers destroyed. I will research other ways, and until the time I find a safe way to remove…”

But Harry heard no more. He jumped up from the chair, sprinted out of the door, that opened without him touching it, and through rooms he did not register, until he reached the garden. There he ripped the portkey from his neck, tossed it aside and kept on running.

Finally he ended up in a remote part of the gardens, behind some bushes under some trees with low hanging branches.

Huge sobs shook his body as he fell to his knees.

There was a piece of Voldemort’s soul in him. As long as he lived the evil wizard could not die. And maybe Dumbledore had known! Had known he would have to die for Voldemort to be defeated for good.

He fell forward, burying his face and hands in the dry grass, feelings of betrayal, disgust and grieve coursing through him.

In the study Marvolo sat behind the desk, staring blankly at the vacated chair with its fish pattern on the blue upholstery opposite from him. He should have anticipated a violent reaction of some kind. The calm Henry had displayed in all the time he now was with him, had lured him into a false sense of security. He could count himself lucky that the boy only had opened the door in his turmoil, and not flung the bringer of the bad news into a wall.

Marvolo snorted. It was good that he had taken a calming draught before he started his explanation. Otherwise there would be quite some things to repair by now. It had been hard to tell someone, even if the one he told was his heir, and the secret protected by magic through the family oath.

But if he had learned something about the young wizard he had adopted, it was that he did not react well to being kept in the dark. And he understood only all too well. Coming from such a background as they did, control over the situation and information were something they craved. He still did not know how much damage this wretched muggles had done to Henry, but he was determined to help his son overcome this legacy. To get stronger. And if he was able to do so, he would like to spare him the struggles he himself had had to face. Severus had had to face. That the old goat had repeated his error with someone belonging to a light family, someone praised for defeating a dark lord, he just could not comprehend.

Standing up, straightening his robes, Marvolo slowly made his way out of the study and into the hall.

Where had Henry run to? The boy certainly had more questions, and he needed to tell him, that
they would move to the London town house this evening after dinner.

At least he needed to make sure the boy was not hurting himself in his emotional state.

Taking out his wand, Marvolo cast the detection spell that would lead him to the pendant with its tracking charm.

He unhurriedly made his way through several rooms, out of the back door from the music room, onto the patio and into the garden. Giving the boy a little time to calm down was probably a good idea, so he did not hurry on his way.

As he came to a flowerbed with some blue flowering plants, he found the pendant and chain laying there, discarded. Well, an act of defiance. Finally.

Taking a deep calming breath, Marvolo told himself that this was a good sign. Maybe.

Going against the orders of a parent was normal behaviour for a teenager. If Henry was confident enough in his knowledge that Marvolo would not hurt him in punishment, then it would be a big step in the right direction in their relationship.

Considering this for a moment, he had to concede, that maybe the teenager just had not been thinking clearly. Well, he would think about this more later, now it was important to find the boy.

“Flimm!” he called. The elf would be able to track Henry down.

oooOOooo

She had cried most of the morning, laying on her bed in the room she shared with Ginny. Once Ron had come to the door, trying to apologize. But as he could not tell her, for what he wanted to say he was sorry, she had sent him away. She was not in the mood to explain herself to her insensitive friend.

Around lunch Mrs. Weasley had brought her some sandwiches, and Ginny had sat with her for a time, visibly unsure of what to do.

Now though, Hermione had cried herself out and could think clearly again.

For one she was sure, that she did not have to tell more people than already knew about her ancestry, so she could at least delay reactions from others. She shuddered at the thought that others might react like Ron had, or would pity her, which would be equally as bad in her opinion.

And two, she had only read about a few members of the family who had made bad choices, following You-Know-Who. It would be prejudiced of her, if she judged the last remaining member of the family, the current Lord Lestrange, based on the actions of his sons. OK, one could argue that the sons probably learned their ways from the father, but influence of peers should not be underestimated. And just because the man was old enough that he had went to school with the boy who grew up to be a dark lord, was no reason to dismiss him as a hopeless case.

Maybe she should look into the records of the Wizengamot to see how the man had voted, and try to meet him in person?
For the time being, she would clean up and get something to eat.

Hermione got up from the bed, grabbed her wash-bag and made for the bathroom a few doors down. It was clean, even if the décor still made it seem gloomy and grim. It fit with the theme of the whole house. Hermione idly wondered what a house Lord Lestrange was living in. One equally as dark as this house? An old one? Something more modern?

As Hermione walked into the kitchen, a good fifteen minutes later, she found Mrs. Weasley working on one of the counters, preparing for dinner.

Mr. Black, Sirius as he insisted she call him, was sitting in a chair at the table, many sheets of parchment laid out around him. The man preparing for his trial on the next day, looked up as he heard the door closing behind the young witch.

Hermione was surprised how good he looked. He had cut his hair and styled it, so it was falling in gentle waves to his chin, his beard was carefully cut and accentuated his features nicely. It was like night and day, compared to the man she had seen back at the end of her third year at Hogwarts.

“Hermione,” Sirius greeted her with a warm smile, “I am sorry that I have been a bad host the last days. But with the trial…”

“Of course!” She hurried to assure him. “I understand. You need to prepare for the trial.” It would be wonderful if she had someone understanding the magical world she could have turned to, but she understood that Sirius and the Weasleys had their own worries and children, and therefore not much time for her.

“Nonsense!” The wizard in his smart robes waved away her unspoken apology. “I pay enough for my solicitor that he can do the work. It is not much, but I have met Lord Lestrange in the past, so if you would like I can tell you what little I know.”

Eager to learn more from a source that was not biased towards the old pureblood families, Hermione nodded and sat down at the table in a chair near the end.

“That would be wonderful! The library was not especially informative. There is much about the Blacks but not much on the other families.”

“Well this is a house belonging to the Blacks, it is only natural that there would be more on the family than on others. What do you want to know?”

And so they started a lively discussion about the things Sirius still remembered about the Lestranges. The late parents of Sirius had been acquaintances of Lord and Lady Lestrange, so that he had met them on more than one occasion. He could tell, that Lord Lestrange had been a strict but loving father, that he had a biting sense of humour and that he never openly had sided with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

As Sirius was talking about the marriage of his cousin Bellatrix to the older Lestrange brother, he had not managed to wiggle himself out of this one, they both did not see Ron coming into the kitchen.

They did not see him making a face and rolling his eyes over their topic of conversation, and only looked up as they heard the door closing behind him, as he left again.
By the time dinner was served, Hermione had formed a plan. She would continue to search for records of the dealings of the House of Lestrange. Sirius had promised to get her the records of votes for Lord Lestrange from the Wizengamot, as his request likely would be handled faster, a fact that rankled Hermione, a way for her to determine the man’s political agenda. And she would try to get to know the man. At least she could learn more about the childhood of her beloved gran.

The tasked proved to be easier than she had anticipated, as an owl brought a letter for her, just after they had finished dinner, a hearty stew with freshly baked bread. She quickly excused herself, clutching the letter with the Lestrange coat of arms on the envelope, and a letter from her parents, which had arrived during the afternoon, to her chest, intending to relay the contents to either party.

Not for a moment she thought about Ron and the words he had said to her in the morning. In fact she ignored him completely, consequently missing the dark look as his eyes followed her retreat.

The twins on the other hand, did see the look their younger brother shoot at the bushy haired witch. Silently communicating their concern, they resolved to speak with their brother, before he could do something stupid.

oooOOooo

Led by the elf, Marvolo found his son in the back of the garden, hidden behind bushes, in the shade of some low hanging branches.

He hesitated in his step, unsure what he should do in the face of the grief the boy suffered. Loud heaving sobs filled the small space with their sound, drowning out everything else. Thinking back to interactions he had observed in the past, Marvolo came to the conclusion, that some comfort had to be given. He sincerely doubted he was the right person to give it, but he was the only one there, the only one the boy could speak with about the reasons for his bone deep sadness.

Slowly and silently he made his way over to the teenager, who was pounding his fists on the dry grass and hard soil. Lowering himself to a sitting position next to the boy, he hesitant laid his hand on the boy’s back and started to rub it in small circles.

Several minutes later, the sun nearing the horizon, the sobs started to get slower and quieter. As the teen finally sat back up, rubbing his bruised hands over his swollen eyes, obviously embarrassed over the whole situation, Marvolo held out the portkey, he had had stored in one of the pockets of his robes, out to the teen. In silent agreement they both pretended the last few minutes never happened.

“I think I was clear, that you should wear this at all times.” He raised a brow and fixed Henry with a pointed look.

Blushing, the boy took the chain and slipped it back over his head, tucking the pendant into his shirt.

“Do you know what you did wrong?” Marvolo asked, watching as the teen got white as a sheet, realising what he had done and clearly fearing the reaction of Marvolo to this actions.

Avoiding the older wizard’s gaze, Henry gave a shrug, playing with the grass in front of him.

“Running of like that was not respectful nor was it polite.”
Hatred for the muggles Henry had lived with rushed through Marvolo, making him want to hex them to the moon and back, as he saw the teen shrinking into himself, rounding his shoulders, looking like he expected blows to start raining on him.

“But understandable, given the news you had to hear today.”

Wide, unbelieving eyes suddenly were fixed unblinking on Marvolo, sitting on the ground, in the garden. Benjamin's prediction, that being a father would lead for him to do things he never thought he would do, seemed much too accurate for Marvolo’s taste. He feared what he would come to do during this endeavour.

“Do you know what you could have done better?” Marvolo was able to keep the fury over the mistreatment of a wizard at the hand of muggles out of his voice, and sounded calm if stern.

“Not throw away the portkey?” Catching on to the meaning of the pointed look and raised brow, Henry quickly tagged on a quiet “Sir.”

Nodding once Marvolo acknowledged that this was part of the answer.

“That too. But you could have told me, that you needed time for yourself, to think. I would then have informed you, that we will move to London after dinner today, and that you can eat your dinner in your room here, if you do not wish for company at the moment.”

The incredulous look the teen was giving him was highly amusing. Throwing others by not acting the way they expected him to act was not getting old, and hopefully would not for quite some time.

He got up from the ground, casting a silent and wandless charm to make all the dead plant matter, clinging to his robes and clothes, fall silently to the ground.

“You should move to your room, and see to it that the elf has packed all of your belongings. I will send your meal there?”

“That would be nice, sir?” His son’s answer came out more like a question, but it was better than the shrugging Henry so often resorted to, so he let it slide.

“Good. We will discuss your punishment, for not wearing your emergency portkey, and therefore putting yourself at risk, at a later time. Maybe tomorrow after breakfast?”

Rapid blinking and a small frown gave away, that Henry was not happy with this plan. But if he did not want to wait this long, or was averse to the fact he was going to get punished for his rash action, Marvolo did not know.

So he looked questioningly down at his son, who was still sitting on the ground, covered in dried grass and leaves.

“Is it possible to discuss it now?” The teen wanted to know, averting his gaze again, looking down to the ground.

So not wanting to wait it was then.

“Very well.” Quickly weighing the options, Marvolo decided on a punishment, unsure if it was the right one, he should have prepared a few in advance. Punishing his followers for errors was much easier than this parenting he had to do now.

“You will answer a type of quiz I will provide you with. And after the trial tomorrow, you will
immediately return home.”

The puzzled look at the mentioning of a quiz quickly morphed to horror at the punishment, of missing out of the anticipated victory party after the trial.

Marvolo watched as the wheels turned behind Henry’s eyes, the boy searching for a way, to change Marvolo’s mind on this.

“Did you not say, that spending time with my godfather was one of my responsibilities, Sir? Is attending a celebration hosted by him not one of these?”

Smirking to himself, happy to see some of the cunning he had known was buried somewhere deep inside his son, Marvolo inclined his head considering.

“You are right, that this could be considered as one of those situations. You can choose. Surrender your broom for a week, or return home the moment the trial is over.”

Marvolo was almost sure that he knew what option Henry would choose, but the teen had surprised him more than once, and so he waited seemingly indifferent, curious what the young wizard would do.

“I will give you my broom, sir.” Henry almost whispered.

“The quiz will be on your desk in your new room in London.”

And with this last words, he turned and walked back to the house. This had been an eventful evening. Being a father surely was a tiring and exciting life.

oooOOooo

Humming tunelessly, Severus Snape, Potions Master, came out of his private lab, closing the door softly behind him. After sleeping in, something he rarely ever did, he had made great progress with the potion he was currently working on.

He had managed to find substitutes for the ingredients no longer as readily available as they were back in the time the instructions had been written, and with an alternate stirring sequence it now was not as prone to blowing up, as it had been on his first try.

It had not happened in a while that a potion he was working on had been this volatile, he mused idly, entering his kitchen. Setting the kettle on the fire, Severus started to prepare tea.

While he waited for the water to boil, the young potions master thought back to the happenings of the night before.

He was relieved that he now no longer was in danger to be considered a traitor, watching Karkaroff being tortured had been an exercise for him. To keep the disgust of this actions from his face out of his posture, had not been easy. He could understand the need to reinforce, that there would be no mercy for traitors, and even the need to keep the Death Eaters happy with the possibility to inflict harm on others. But he did not like to watch, and hoped that it would be a long time before something like it came up again.
The talk after the big meeting had been interesting in comparison.

Learning that Hermione Granger, the most annoying know-it-all he had to teach in years, was related to Lestrange, had been quite the surprise. He wondered if this little titbit of information had been spoken about at the order meeting of the previous evening. His guess would be that Albus did not want this information shared with too many.

Telling the older man, it was hard to comprehend that Lord Lestrange was as old as the Dark Lord, as the dark wizard looked so much younger, about everything he knew about the girl had been something he gladly had done. Maybe the Lord could help the girl acclimate to the wizarding world better than she had done so far.

He distantly remembered some rumours from the last school year, claiming that the elves refused to clean Gryffindor Tower, as the girl tended to hide knitted clothes in the debris littering the floor. Not that this would even work to free the elves, but they perceived it as an insult.

She would do good with a mentor versed in the ways of the wizarding world. The question was if she would take the advice.

Severus was sure, that Lord Lestrange would be able to find a balance with the girl and would not alienate her with prejudice and bias.

Thinking of prejudice. Severus was unsure if he could teach the son of Lily, as his Lord had asked of him. It had not escaped his notice, that it had been a question, not an order. For a brief moment his thoughts wandered to the question what Dumbledore would have done, if he thought the boy needed to learn the art. It was not much of a question. He would have used Severus’ promise to protect the teenager and his guilt and forced him to do it.

The dark haired wizard had no doubt how this would have ended. Teaching the mind arts was nothing that could be done if either teacher or pupil were resentful or forced.

He poured himself a cup of tea, added honey and walked over into the living room, sitting down at the small writing table stashed away to the side, starting to prepare the report and request for test subjects he had to write.

As he could follow the Dark Lord’s reasoning, neither he nor Dumbledore were suitable teachers for Harry, he resolved to work on his attitude so he would be able to teach occlumency to the son of his childhood friend. If they managed to salvage their relationship, it might be possible that they succeeded.

Taking a sip from his tea, opening the inkwell, Severus started to write his report, filling the parchment with his neat, spidery handwriting.

Looking around the room, Marvolo got his papers out of his robe pocket, enlarging the small package. The filing cabinet in one corner behind the exquisitely carved desk, would do as a storing place, after he had added a few wards of his own.

This day had been a trying one. Henry’s reaction to his revelations, had been not what he expected. Even if he was not sure what he had expected. An emotional breakdown of some kind had been
unavoidable, of that at least he was sure.

As he had apparated them both to London, he had asked his son, if he wanted to talk about it. And the teenager had requested not to speak about it tonight. It was a reasonable request, as he certainly needed more time to process the information he had been given.

Only a moment later, the teenager had gotten his broom out of his trunk handing it over to Marvolo, before setting off to select a room for himself.

That his son was not arguing about the punishment had Marvolo surprised. He was unsure if he was glad about it or not. Was it too easy? Or too harsh? Disciplining teenagers was hard. Knowing that Henry had been at least neglected by his previous guardians, only added to the difficulties.

Pinching his nose, Marvolo decided not to think about this more, getting out his wand he started to cast the first few wards around the filing cabinet. The more intricate ones he would cast in a few days, as they required runes to be carved and a ritual to be performed. Maybe Henry would consent to watch. It was, after all, a practical application of the subject he had taken up, and therefore a good way to help motivate him.

A few minutes later he was satisfied that no one would break into the cabinet, without alarming him and being immobilized, so he would find the would be thief once he arrived here.

Opening the drawers, and admiring the high quality wood and carpentry, he sorted his files on various things into different groups.

Things pertaining to the estates he now had to manage, one for everything related to his son, one for his own correspondence and a last one for his research on distant family members. Everything that was related to the shadier parts of his live, he had left at the other house. He had to separate his personas as much as he was able. This house was the home of his son, everything too dark would not come here. Even if he should succeed in swaying Henry to his side.

As the last file he added the contract with the private detective he had hired to research in the Muggle world. He needed to track down all possible branches originating from the one Squib on Henry’s ancestry tree. And he had to keep an eye on his son’s cousin. He might be a muggle, but it was possible that one of his children, or grandchildren, would be magical.

And as he neither had the time nor wanted to spent any time between muggles, he had searched for an expert.

He was unsure how to find out if there had been more Squibs that had had children.

Closing the drawer, Marvolo went out into the hallway, ignoring the painting of the Potters, like they ignored him, and extinguished the light. Time for him to go up to his rooms.

In the bedroom farthest from the master bedroom, Harry finished placing his school books into the cherry wood bookcase by the desk. Despite all that had happened today, he marvelled at the fact, that this room now would be his.

Careful he let his fingers wander over the carvings of griffins and phoenixes that adorned the
bookcase and the desk. The floor was a nice light oak parquet, that was almost invisible under the wool rugs in different shades of blue. the walls were painted in a rich blue, which reminded the teen of a nice sunny and hot summer day.

He had a study area by one window, with a desk, chair and bookcase. A separate sitting area with a love seat and armchair placed around a fireplace. A big bed not unlike the one he had in the Gryffindor dorms, with a silken comforter in a nice earth tone and curtains in a blue, dark like the sky after dusk.

His school trunk was standing at the foot of the bed and was now mostly empty. Only the drenches of sweet wrappers, old socks, broken quills and other small rubbish, remaining.

His clothes had been placed in his own, small walk-in-closet by Flimm, who would be his personal elf, whenever he was home for the holidays.

Harry smiled as he thought what Hermione might would have to say about this.

With all things placed where they belonged, Harry had now nothing left to distract himself. And without delay his thoughts returned to the talk, he had had with Voldemort this afternoon. Struggling to not think about the reason for the connection between the two of them, Harry instead focused on the oddity of being comforted by the Dark Lord of their time.

First he had not realised who was sitting beside him, rubbing his back and murmuring nonsensical words in a soothing tone. He just had been glad, that he was not alone, that there was someone that cared.

As he finally realized that it had been Voldemort, he had been mortified. And now, looking back, he realized that the adult wizard had felt the same.

Once, Harry had listened from his cupboard as Petunia had explained to Dudley the concept of something called Stockholm syndrome. The captive coming to like sometimes even love their captor. He had thought the idea ridiculous, but now, now he could guess what would cause such a change.

Not for the first time he wondered, how it could be that Voldemort cared more for him, than every other adult he ever had encountered. It was a puzzle he was not able to solve. And a danger to him. He had to remember that Voldemort was the enemy.

Harry heard a soft popping sound, and turned to the desk. A scroll, bound with a dark green silken ribbon, now was laying in the middle of it. Frowning the teenager assumed, that this was the quiz that was part of his punishment. He was proud that he had found a way to be able to celebrate with his godfather after the trial, but sad, that he had to give up his broom for a whole week in exchange.

As he was sure, that he would not be able to sleep right now, and as it was better to get it over with, Harry moved over to the desk, sat down on the soft but firm pillow in his chair, and opened the scroll.

First he was unsure what he should think, as the parchment was blank. But moments later, before his very eyes, the now familiar script of his current guardian started to write out a caption, ‘Quiz over the uses of portkeys’, and a first question.

Smiling despite himself, Harry was sure he knew where this was going. He got a quill out of the
casket, sitting at the edge of the desk in the upper middle, tested the point the way Theodore had shown him, and got ready to answer the questions.

What is the best response from those given, if you find yourself in the woods faced with two wild sows (female wild boar) and their young?

1. Try to incapacitate them with spells, hoping to take both out before they attack.
2. Running away
3. Climbing one of the trees and waiting until they have moved away
4. Freezing in terror
5. Using an emergency portkey to a safe location.

He made a check at the fifth answer, and watched as the next question appeared. He snorted after reading it and wondered what would happen, if he decided to answer one of them wrong. As a third question appeared he asked himself how many there might be. Only one way to find out.

And so Marvolo heard some quiet laughter coming from his son’s room, as he made his way to his own room an hour later. He smiled. Hopefully after this exercise the boy would know the value of an emergency portkey and would not discard his again.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has not yet been corrected by a beta reader

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In the en-suite of the master bedroom, Sirius checked one last time that his hair was styled into the respectable cut Mr. Bench insisted on.

Not entirely at home in the shiny new dress shoes, the dark blue trousers of fine wool, the silk dress shirt with the silver cuff-links, waistcoat of Gryffindor-red silk and an open black over-robe, Sirius took a deep breath and turned to the door.

As he reached the formal parlour with the floo, where they all wanted to meet, only Remus was already there. The former professor had thrown on his best robes, which had seen better days... a long time ago. The werewolf gave his friend a reassuring smile and walked over, looking his appearance up and down.

“You look good, Padfoot. So … respectable!” At Sirius’ exasperated eye-roll, Remus started to chuckle. “Sorry, old friend. Just nervous, I guess.”

“James Bench assures me that there is no need to be nervous,” Sirius said in a joking manner. But his eyes betrayed his own nervousness.

The door to the parlour opened, and Arthur walked in, followed by his children, those that still were in school, and his wife. They all were in their best robes, Sirius noticed. He felt a nice warmth welling up inside of him. All those people cared about him, went to some trouble to be at his trial and provide moral support.

As the last one, Hermione came into the parlour, dressed in a pleated skirt, a nice blue blouse, knee-high white stockings, and a simple open dark-blue robe, just a tad longer than her skirt. It was obvious to Sirius that she had put thought and effort into her appearance, taming her curly hair into something less bushy by braiding it.

Sending her a smile and getting a shaky one in return, the animagus turned to the fireplace and the roaring green flames that brought his solicitor into the house.

“Mr. Black, I see everyone is ready to leave.” The burly man in his pinstripe robes over the black satin waistcoat and dark grey trousers, greeted with confidence. “We will leave for the office of the Head of the DMLE,” the solicitor nodded in Sirius’ direction. “The rest of you will have to floo to the atrium and go to the courtroom and into the public section.” The man smiled brightly at the assembled group and asked, “Are there any more questions?”

As all were shaking their heads indicating that there were no more questions, the solicitor held out his arm to Sirius motioning for him to go first.

Taking a fortifying breath, Sirius smiled at his supporters, stepped up to the floo, and took a pinch of the sparkling green powder out of the small ceramic bowl on the mantel. He threw the powder down, stepping into the green flames, clearly stating, “Ministry of Magic, Amelia Bones’ office.”

Spinning rapidly around his own axis, Sirius got a last glance at his friends, before the fireplaces started to rush through his vision.

A moment later he stepped out of the floo into the office of the current head of the Department of
Magical Law Enforcement, where two aurors and Director Bones were already waiting for him.

“Good morning, Madame Bones,” Sirius greeted with a proper bow, trying not to flinch as one auror trained his wand on him, while the other came closer, probably to search him for dangerous objects or substances, and to confiscate his wand.

Sirius was not entirely comfortable with parting from his wand, but he knew that there would be a cold day in hell when they would let him keep it.

He gave a relieved breath as James Bench appeared in a flash of green flames, only a moment behind him.

“Mr. Black,” Madame Bones said in a businesslike manner, “Auror Wood will escort you and your solicitor to the temporary holding cell, until it is time for you to come to the courtroom.”

The man that just had taken Sirius’ wand out of its holster on his right forearm, nodded after handing it to his colleague. “If you would follow me.”

Nervousness that had lurked in the background of his mind all morning, now slammed full force into him, and made his stomach churn and his knees tremble. Taking a deep breath, getting strength from the confident posture of his solicitor, Sirius followed the auror out of the office and down a corridor.

Only today, and then he would be free. He would manage this. For Harry. For his godson.

With a confident air, hiding the nerves, Sirius followed on his last way as a perceived criminal.

Harry was nervous. And exasperated over that fact. Sirius would be a free man after today. There was no room for doubt. After all, the man who had killed his parents would tell in front of the judges that it had not been Sirius who had betrayed his parents, but Peter Pettigrew.

The man who had tried to kill him, adopted him without his consent, and had splintered his soul so often that a piece of it had attached itself to Harry.

He still had trouble wrapping his head around that.

After he had finished the quiz the evening before, he had gone to bed in his wonderful new room and had tried hard not to think about the soul-piece.

He had not succeeded.

It had been confusing, all of it. Beside the fact that it was possible to split a soul and store pieces of it in containers, the teen could not understand why someone would even think about doing it. And that Voldemort had done it several times. It was just a concept he would never understand.

Being told this was even more confusing. Harry was not accustomed to anyone telling him things. That is, adults telling him things concerning him.

And here was Voldemort, murderer, madman, evil Dark Lord, telling him the secret behind his not dying on Halloween of 1981. Even if Harry was not able to tell anyone about this because he was
bound by the Family oath, he now knew. Knew something that probably no one else had ever been
told, or ever would be told.

At breakfast, in the kitchen with waffles made by Flimm, the man had asked how Harry had slept
and if he was up to going out into the open, going to the Ministry for his godfather’s trial. Harry
had gotten the impression that if he had said no, he would have been allowed to stay home.

Instead he had said that of course he was fine and would come to the Ministry. So the man with the
red eyes had asked for the portkey and reset the “home” location before handing it back, and told
the raven-haired teen that if he wanted to speak about the link, or anything related to it, he was
welcome to seek him out.

Slipping into his room - he had been up to the small owlery in the attic, next to the elf rooms, to
check if Hedwig had made it safely here - Harry went over to the clothes that were laid out on his
bed.

Time to get dressed.

While he went through the motions, Harry could not stop his thoughts from returning to his newest
dilemma.

Dumbledore. Yesterday the young wizard, named a hero by many, had seen the fury in
Voldemort’s eyes over the fact that Dumbledore had known about the link and its likely cause, and
done nothing. Or at least Harry had concluded that this was what the man had wanted Harry to
believe.

Still wary of information given by the man, Harry had come to the same conclusion while lying in
his bed, turning restlessly from one side to the other, searching for a spot that was still cool.
Dumbledore had hinted that there had been some kind of transfer the night Voldemort had tried to
kill Harry. And he had seen one of the containers the evil wizard had used to store a piece of his
soul. The Headmaster of Hogwarts was too intelligent not to have come up with the idea that there
might be something more about the scar on Harry’s forehead, and the pain he had felt when near
Voldemort.

And the old man had done nothing. Or appeared to have done nothing. He had not spoken with
Harry, had not tried to confirm the suspicions he must have had.

The list with questions Harry had for the Headmaster was growing rather long.

Why had no wizard or witch ever checked on him, while he was staying with the Dursleys? Why
did he have to go back there, when he so clearly said he did not want to go back? Why not check
after that? Why had Dumbledore not told him about all the things he had to learn to fill the spot in
the Wizengamot waiting for him? Was it because the Headmaster thought that Harry had to die?

It was a sobering thought. One Harry fervently wished he could dismiss, because he wanted to
believe the Headmaster cared for him. But he just could not.

Too often he had been ignored, not been told important things, shoved away at the Dursleys,
isolated.

No, Harry was not happy with the Headmaster of his school. The first place he had called home.
And how pathetic was that?

Stepping in front of the mirror in his wardrobe room, Harry checked his clothes. He wore the
formal robe with the combined family colours over a dress shirt and waistcoat, black embroidered
with silver and golden thread, and simple dark trousers. Looking down at his shiny dress shoes, Harry felt good and out of place all at once. He looked so wealthy. Not like some runaway in clothes nicked from the second-hand store or welfare.

Another thing that should have raised some questions at Hogwarts. If not from Dumbledore himself, then from one of the teachers.

It felt so wrong to feel cared for by the man that had always been painted as the greatest evil on earth.

He wanted someone to care for him, to ask about his homework, his grades. Someone to set some rules, to be a parent.

He had hoped this person would be Sirius, but had understood that he could not take this place as long as he was on the run. Another thing he had to lay at Dumbledore’s feet. Would Voldemort have been able to simply adopt him, if Sirius had been his guardian? He was a wizard after all, and not just a muggle aunt.

Slipping his wand into the holster on his arm, Harry took a deep breath and turned to leave for the entrance hall.

They would apparate to Nott House and use the floo from there, as Griffin House was not currently connected to the floo network. Over his second cup of coffee, Voldemort had told Harry that he intended to use their trip to the Ministry today to file the request for the house to be connected. There were a few other things they probably would be doing after the trial, like getting information from the Department of Magical Education about the OWL exams and when they were offered.

And maybe Harry would get the opportunity to ask Headmaster Dumbledore some of the questions that were constantly on his mind.

Reaching the entrance hall, Harry found Voldemort standing just inside the door, waiting for him. The man was dressed in formal robes himself, hair styled to perfection, his eyes glamoured to hide the fact they were actually red, now appearing to be blue.

“Ready to brave the masses?” Voldemort asked with an assessing look over Harry’s clothes. He gave a nod of approval and smiled at the teen. Harry thought the man looked a little unsure and wondered why that could be.

“Before we go, a few last things.” The look the man sent to his adopted son spoke clearly of the importance of what was to be said next. “Do not go anywhere on your own. Stay with Benjamin, Theodore, me, or the parents of your friends. Do not speak with strangers, especially not with the press. They tend to be like grindylows when blood is in the water. We should wait for you to have more experience with them, before you deal with them on your own.”

Thinking about his encounters with the press, in the form of Rita Skeeter, during the tournament of the last school year, Harry snorted and nodded his head, there would be no arguments about this from him.

“I think that is all. Let’s go.”

They left the entrance hall through the front door and stopped on the front step. The wards to hide from the muggles of the neighbourhood extended up to the small gate in the fence surrounding the small garden, and did hide all unusual things happening in front of the house. All this Voldemort had explained over breakfast, after Harry had not been very forthcoming and conversation had been
strained.

The mornings at Nott House had been much more relaxed.

They landed in the designated apparition spot inside of Nott House. Harry stumbled and got a good look at the mosaic of a dolphin jumping out of waves, as he tried to regain his equilibrium.

“Marvolo!” the elder Nott greeted. He too was dressed in his Wizengamot robes, and was followed by his heir. Theodore smiled broadly at Harry, who smiled back.

The Slytherin was an all-right guy. Harry was a little embarrassed that he was so surprised over it. Maybe they would never be real friends, the way he was with Hermione and Ron, but good acquaintances, that was a real possibility.

“How is the new room?” Theodore was clad in trousers, shirt, waistcoat and robe much as Harry was, only his colours were those of the Nott family. And while Harry started on a detailed description of his new room, he felt a pang of worry. How would Ron feel next to him, now that he had such nice new clothes? If the redhead’s reaction from the afternoon at the ice-cream parlour was any indication, it was not going to be easy.

A few moments later, the single fathers had finished whatever they had to discuss and took a boy each per side-flooing to the Ministry. The boys were a little miffed about this, clearly thinking that they were old enough to go on their own. But the fathers did not want to take any risks.

Helping steady his son as they exited the flames from one of the public floos in the Ministry atrium, Marvolo swept the huge room with his gaze.

Just as he had thought, the hall was filled with people milling about. Uncounted numbers of Ministry workers and officials, aurors, press, and the interested witch and wizard from next door.

All the chattering morphed into a background buzz, and with all the colourful robes, Marvolo felt himself reminded of the market days in London when he had still been a kid.

“Stay near, Henry,” he cautioned his son, and started to walk over to the security desk to get their wands registered, so they would be able to go to the courtroom where, hopefully, they would be relatively safe from being assaulted by the press.

Noting that Benjamin and both boys were following him closely, the dark wizard resumed his restless observation of the room.

He was nervous. And not the kind of nervous from being excited over a challenge to come, like the morning before his first meeting with Fudge. No, it was more like a foreboding feeling that something was going to go wrong.

He had not had this feeling for … a really long time, as he could not remember feeling it ever. Maybe before he had lost so much through his own errors. Mulling the problem over in his head, cautiously avoiding the other people walking about, they slowly made their way over the dark floor.
As they stepped into the line, waiting to be processed by the lone auror trainee behind the counter, Marvolo looked at his son, as he was standing with Theodore chattering in low voices about the last runes lesson they had had together and the homework they had been assigned. Seeing the seemingly carefree smile of the teen, Marvolo wondered about Henry’s reaction to the punishment he had been given.

Was this normal? Or was Henry reacting as he, Marvolo, had when he was younger? He never had been punished for anything while in Hogwarts. Mostly because he had not been caught. But he had been punished in the orphanage. Unfairly, or so was his own opinion. And it had made him resent those that were meant to care for him, and who never did.

Was Henry’s reaction to it all the same? Was he hiding his true feelings? Marvolo was not really sure. Had he been unfair?

His thoughts came to a grinding halt. Had he just thought he might have acted unfairly? Being a father really was affecting him. Forcing his thoughts onto a different path, Marvolo decided to speak with Severus on his opinion of what punishments were useful with teenagers. The man had been the Head of House in Hogwarts for quite some time now and had experience. Maybe he could also ask him about Henry’s reaction, as the man never lost so much of his emotions, he likely was better to judge how a boy from a background like theirs was likely to react to different punishments and situations.

As the wizard came to this conclusion, it was their turn to get their wands checked. They stepped up and saw the young man behind the counter pale as he recognized who was standing before him.

Marvolo felt the urge to smile, it was funny to see the reactions of everyone, their floundering because they just did not know what to think or how to react, but he opted to look a little sad instead. Handing over his wand with great reluctance he masked expertly, it was checked, and within moments, their little group was processed.

“I think we should go ahead and find a place for the boys in the courtroom,” Benjamin suggested, eyeing the growing crowd a little worriedly.

“I agree,” Marvolo nodded, steering his son by his shoulders in the direction of the elevators.

The line up to the counter now was easily twice as long as it had been the moment they had taken their place in it.

There was potential for something to go wrong with this many people in one place.

Thinking it might have been wise to take Crabb and Goyle with them, Marvolo spotted some people he wanted to speak to in the line, waiting their turn.

Just as he made a step in their direction, Henry spotted them as well and gave a wary and curious glance from the corner of his eyes to his guardian.

Not bothering to lower his voice, Marvolo inclined his head in greeting and addressed the man he had spotted, standing in the line accompanied by a few teenagers.

“Mr. Lupin.”

The addressed man inclined his head in return and answered in a polite tone. “Lord Slytherin.”

“It is a fortunate coincidence that we meet here.” Marvolo smiled charmingly and saw the small flicker of amusement over the acting in the eyes of the werewolf. “I want to offer you the position of history tutor for my son and heir.” He did not add that the man had been the best of all
applicants, by far the best.

Marvolo stretched his hand out and Remus Lupin took and shook it. “Thank you, Lord Slytherin. I am happy about the opportunity.”

Henry was not able to suppress a small cheer, a really quiet one, and Mr. Lupin gave the teen a bright smile.

“The offer of the use of one of the flats belonging to the Potters in London still stands. There is one over a small odds and ends shop in a side alley to Diagon,” Marvolo offered, getting attention back to himself.

“I’m happy with my current accommodation, Lord Slytherin. But thanks nonetheless for the offer,” Mr. Lupin declined politely.

Accepting this decision with a nod, Marvolo briefly wondered about the difference in behaviour between this polite and educated man and the werewolves he had worked with before his fall. Education clearly made a difference.

“I will send the contract ready for your signature by owl sometime later today.” The wizard in his shabby robes nodded in acknowledgement. “And I would suggest to starting lessons tomorrow, if this is agreeable with your schedule?”

“It is,” was the werewolf’s reply after a short pause.

Marvolo was about to get a small roll of parchment from his robe pocket, as a small “Hem hem” of someone clearing her throat to gain attention, sounded from behind him. Scolding himself silently for not paying better attention to his surroundings, even if it was difficult to keep track of the people around them with this many milling about, Marvolo turned to face whoever was standing behind him.

He could not resist raising a brow at what he was seeing. The short witch standing there, with a sour expression he would expect to be directed at a sticky toddler and not himself, was clad head to toe in different but equally ugly shades of pink.

“You are aware that you are hiring a werewolf? Or was it trying to trick you?” The woman had a sneer on her face and a tone of voice so ugly, that Marvolo felt the hair on his arms rise. He had seen and done many things that would make others faint, but for whatever reason, this woman made him uneasy. She was someone to keep an eye on.

“I am aware that Mr. Lupin is affected by lycanthropy. And who might you be?” He gave her his best uninterested, why-do-you-even-dare-to-bother-me look and was happy to see that the woman bristled with hurt pride.

“I am Undersecretary to the Minister, Dolores Umbridge. And you are?” The rather small woman tried to look down on him, an action that made her look even more ridiculous than her ghastly clothes.

From behind there were retching sounds to be heard and giggling from the teens, forcing Marvolo to use all his control not to start laughing. Oh, life was so much better with more than a little fragment of soul.

Moving his hand so that the family ring with the Slytherin coat of arms reflected the light, the handsome wizard smiled unpleasantly. “Lord Slytherin will be enough.” The witch paled under her greying hair.
Only a moment later the colour came back in a flush of barely contained anger. “The law forbids the Ministry or Ministry officials to hire those monsters.” She stabbed a finger in Mr. Lupin’s direction, her voice rising higher and higher, getting shriller with each word.

Keeping cool, and aware of the growing audience, Marvolo considered his options and decided to start to push his new political agenda regarding werewolves.

“In fact, Madame Undersecretary, that is not entirely correct. The law states that wizards and witches affected by lycanthropy cannot be hired for posts in any way connected to the Ministry. And as I do not hire Mr. Lupin as a soon-to-be member of the Wizengamot, but in my capacity as a father, there is no problem at all.” He smiled at the silently fuming witch.

“And before you start,” he held up a hand as if to stop her going forward. “I know about the other ridiculous and pointless laws passed in the last few years. That so-called ‘werewolves’ are not allowed to own immovable property, has no logical reason. And that anyone employing someone affected by this curse can be held accountable for any damage done during nights of the full moon is just petty.”

Without a word, Madame Umbridge turned and stalked over to the elevators with a rigid spine and trembling hands.

“What a toad,” came the snide remark from one of the young Weasley boys, and Marvolo agreed silently.

Shaking his head, the dark wizard turned around again, to meet the mixed bag of expressions in the small group behind him.

Benjamin looked mildly curious, contemplating what those statements might mean for their cause. Theodore was mostly listening and taking in to evaluate at a later point in time. Henry was looking confused again, as were the Weasley twins, confused and scheming. Mr. Lupin looked pensive, like someone confronted with a puzzle and not sure yet whether he should try to solve it or let it be. Ron Weasley, the boy who was a friend of his son, looked ready to murder someone, and Marvolo was quite certain this someone was him. Hopefully this hatred would not be carried over to Henry, his son had few friends to begin with and could not afford to lose one at this point in his life.

And then the blue-glamoured eyes fell on the pale face of the youngest Weasley child. Ginny, or Ginevra, was staring wide-eyed at Marvolo, trembling slightly. For a brief moment the new Lord Slytherin wondered what had the girl so terrified until he remembered.

He flinched, visibly, guilt for having forgotten that this young girl had been in possession of his diary for an entire school year, writing in it, ending up possessed by the part of his soul entrapped in it, washing through him.

He quickly averted his eyes, thinking furiously about what he should do, how he should react. The girl was one of the few, if not the only one, associating his real face with evil. Well, maybe Dumbledore was another one linking his face to the persona he had created in his youth. Most others had an easier time separating Voldemort from the young-looking Lord Slytherin.

Settling on acting like someone uncomfortable with the whole situation, Marvolo let his body show the reactions he had. First he paled in shock, then he flushed in embarrassment, ducking his head, before he regained control over his mask.

As an attempt to apologize in such a public setting would have been not only inappropriate but foolish, he merely got the scroll out of his pocket and extended the hand holding it to Mr. Lupin.
“A letter to the owner of Twilfitt and Tattons. I want you to go there and order three decent sets of robes.” Reluctantly the new history tutor accepted the scroll from his new employer with a nod and tucked it away in a pocket of his own fraying, dark-grey robes.

“May I impose on you to keep an eye on Henry?” Marvolo finally asked. The line of waiting witches and wizards, had moved on quite a bit, and they had to go to the courtroom pretty soon. “I am certain my son would prefer the company of his friends.” Here Marvolo indicated the teenagers standing behind the werewolf. “And as I am to be called as witness, I cannot watch him all the time.”

Without looking, Marvolo felt Henry perk up at the prospect of sitting with his friends, instead of sitting with one of Marvolo’s associates, and the smiles on Miss Granger’s and the twins’ faces were brilliant as well.

After Mr. Lupin had agreed to look over the teens, the group split up. Benjamin and Marvolo went to meet with the other Wizengamot members, Theodore went to meet with Draco and his mother, who walked past at this moment, and Remus Lupin and his herd of teenagers made their way to the places in the section traditionally used by those belonging to the one accused.

Remus herded the teenagers through the crowd and to the benches. Ginny was decidedly pale, so he made his way over to her. “Are you okay, Ginny?” The former professor laid a hand on the girl’s shoulder.

The girl turned to look at Harry, who was walking between the twins, listening to their description of some prank, and instead of answering Remus’ question asked one of her own of the well-dressed teen. “How can you stand looking at him? Being near him?” Her voice was shaky and her eyes glittering with unshed tears.

At first the dark-haired teen looked absolutely clueless, but only moments later understanding dawned on his face and, concerned, he moved over to the younger girl’s side.

“I see him at each meal, he teaches me what I need to know when I will be Lord Potter in a few years. I…” he searched for words, raking a hand through his locks, destroying the carefully groomed hairstyle. “I guess it's impossible to stay in a state of constant fear and hatred if the source behaves decently?” Harry looked a little sheepish and said the last word with much reluctance.

Before the conversation could turn into a shouting match, Remus stepped in, changing the topic slightly. “Do you want to go home, Ginny?” Just at this moment Mrs. and Mr. Weasley came to their spot on the benches, and the mother bustled over to her daughter, starting to question her over her sickly appearance.

Relieved that he did not have to console the poor girl, Remus turned to the older teenagers. The twins had sat down, saving places for their group and watching the others pouring into the courtroom with interest. Hermione hovered near Molly and Ginny, unsure if she could and should try to help. Harry had a guilty look, standing near Remus.

“You okay, Harry?” the werewolf asked his honorary godson quietly.

“I don’t know?” was the reply. “Nothing fits together. I know what he did. What he probably will
do again. But he acts so differently...” Harry trailed off, shrugging, clearly struggling to come to terms with his situation.

Before they could continue with their conversation, Arthur left his wife’s side and searched all their faces. “On the way here I heard a most interesting rumour.” Remus shifted his attention to the head of the Weasley family. Here and now was not the place to speak with Harry about his situation, that would have to wait for later.

“Lord Slytherin, supposedly, got in a kind of argument with Madame Umbridge and disagreed with her?” His blue eyes searched the crowd left and right, as if to check that no one he did not want to hear what he was saying was near. “About the werewolf legislation?”

Remus nodded, but before he could say anything, the twins started to speak.

“That was fun!” “That toad of a woman is a nasty one.” “He called the laws ridiculous and pointless.”

Even if they were speaking in their usual manner, changing who spoke frequently, they were not as hyper as usual. Remus noted their pensive look and the gazes both sneaked at him and Harry as well as Ron.

“So it is true?” Arthur sounded not really convinced. “He wants to abolish those laws?”

“It certainly seems to be so,” nodded Remus. He turned to Harry, “Has he spoken to you about politics?”

“Not really. Not about anything concrete. More about how everything works. He wants me to decide if I want Professor Dumbledore to stay regent. I have to read all the decisions he made. Most of it is boring,” Harry tried to explain.

Molly came over. “I will take Ginny home. She is quite shaken,” The resolute woman informed them.

“Do so, dear,” Arthur agreed, giving his wife a short kiss.

They all watched mother and daughter find their way through the crowd, down to the floor and out of the doors.

“Seeing Lord Slytherin was a shock for her,” Ginny’s father said to no one in particular. He sighed and turned to his sons.

“He looked guilty though,” George, telling the twins apart by scent had been easy since he had to teach the pranksters for a year, stated.

“As he should be,” Ron added, anger evident in his voice, face, and posture.

Remus heard Harry sigh behind him, and started to make them all sit down. The start of the trial was only minutes away.

ooooo

In a corridor outside the room used by the Wizengamot members preparing to be the judges of the
trial, Marvolo stood with the few of his followers who never had been implicated and could openly associate with him.

“How do you like your new home, Marvolo?” Xerxes asked his old school friend with a little smile.

Chuckling a little, Marvolo smirked to his friend. “Well, it is not as dreadfully Gryffindor as I had feared. In fact it is a nice house, not too big for only my son and I, and warded enough so we will be safe.”

Benjamin listened to his Lord, smiling and watching the reactions of the others, who were arriving now that the trial was about to begin.

And he was watching his Lord too. The man was saner, looked really handsome, he drew looks from many a Lady walking by, and seemed to make better decisions. Considering the last few days, he deemed it unlikely that Marvolo - it was getting easier to think of his Lord by that name - would go back to being a madman.

While Xerxes talked about the correspondence he had started with Hermione Granger - Benjamin was curious over the reason behind that - he spotted Lucius coming down the hall. The blond Lord walked with his head held high, reminding Lord Nott of the peacocks Lucius was so fond of.

“Xerxes, Benjamin,” Lord Malfoy greeted with a nod. And as an afterthought, following the cover needed with his story from after the fall of their Lord, inclined his head in Marvolo’s direction. “Lord Slytherin.”

They both sported neutral expressions, and Benjamin looked forward to the careful political dance he was about to witness.

“I heard the most intriguing rumour on my way down here,” drawled Lucius with a polite smile and a spark of fear in his eyes.

The blond Lord had maneuvered himself into an uncomfortable position by claiming that he had been under the influence of the Imperius curse during the last war. Benjamin always had wondered how the Malfoys had managed to get out of the mess and was now hoping to find entertainment watching how they worked to get back into their Lord’s group.

“And what rumours might that have been?” Lord Slytherin answered with a raised brow.

“That you, Lord Slytherin, advocate for equal rights for werewolves.” The last word was spoken with venom, but Benjamin saw right through the act, as the spark of fear spiked. Speaking against their Lord, even if needed for a mask in public, was something they had been trained to fear. Even at the thought of doing so, Benjamin felt the hairs on his arm stand, and a cold chill running down his back.

“Well, yes. One could say that I do.” The smile of their Dark Lord got decidedly predatory. “I daresay every sensible man would do the same.”

That got several surprised, if hurriedly hidden, looks from all those around them. This was more a performance to get the information out there, than an explanation for the benefit of Lord Malfoy.

“Oh, is that so?” Scepticism oozed from Lucius’ voice and posture. Benjamin internally applauded his friend for his acting skills and looked back to Marvolo. Changing looking at each one in turn felt a little bit like watching a beginner’s duel, where spells were cast by turns.
“Yes. The law as it stands pushes affected wizards and witches to live in the muggle world, or the wild, if they want to live at all. This increases the threat to the Statue of Secrecy due to the increased exposure. If we change the laws, we can keep them in the magical community. I think this is preferable.”

Before they could get deeper into the discussion, the chime sounded that called them all to the chamber. The group quickly parted, the Wizengamot members moving into the antechamber, Marvolo moving over to the room in which the witnesses waited until the point they were called to give testimony.

Benjamin straightened his robes and followed Lady Longbottom through the door.

ooooo

Harry watched the members of the Wizengamot come in through a door behind the elevated seats. He spotted Neville’s grandmother and Theodore’s father, as well as other notable figures of the various factions Voldemort had tried to get him to learn. Keeping all the names and faces straight was difficult. But at least he would spot them on the street. Or so he hoped at least.

As the room settled into a hushed silence, Harry’s nerves made themselves known. The teen barely could sit still in his place between Fred and Hermione.

“Order! Order in the chamber!” called Percy over the din that had started again after the Wizengamot members had sat down. As junior secretary in the Ministry, Percy did duty as a scribe quite regularly. He looked happy to be here in this capacity for this important trial.

The din faded to a low murmur, and Harry froze in his seat as two aurors came into the courtroom bringing Sirius with them.

It felt like an eternity since Harry had seen him. The teen had to smile at the formal robes his godfather was wearing, as he normally preferred to dress in much less formal wear.

Harry saw him flinch as he sat down in the chair in the middle of the almost round room and the chains attached to the chair wound around him.

Then Madame Bones - Voldemort had made sure Harry knew the faces and names of the important officials in the trial – stood, and the show began.

“Esteemed members of the Wizengamot, Minister. We are here for the trial of Sirius Orion Black,” began the stern witch in her official robes that clashed horribly with her skin tone. “He was arrested in 1981 under suspicion of betrayal of the Potters and the murder of Peter Pettigrew and twelve muggles.”

The whole room held their breath in excitement. Some cameras were flashing as the press took pictures. This was one of the events of the year.

“Due to new evidence brought before the Wizengamot and the DMLE earlier this month, a new investigation was started, uncovering that there never had been a trial. This error will be corrected today.”

She turned to the wizard with wig and black robes standing beside Sirius. “Mr. Bench, your client
consents to being interrogated with Veritaserum?”

The solicitor gave a small nod. “My client consents.”

On a small gesture from the head of the DMLE an auror walked forward, holding something small in his hand that Harry could not really see from his place in the crowd.

As the auror in his crimson robes stood beside Sirius, the man tipped his head back and opened his mouth. The auror moved his hand to hover over the opened mouth, dropping in the necessary three drops of potion, as was procedure.

They waited a few tense moments, before Madame Bones started the interrogation.

“What is your name?”

“Sirius Orion Black.”

A shiver run down Harry’s spine at the monotone and empty voice Sirius answered in. He felt only too clearly the reminder of the evening of the third task as the house-elf Winky had been interrogated by Dumbledore with the very same potion.

“When were you born?”

“November the third, 1959.”

She nodded then, the effectiveness of the potion proven. Harry knew now the real questions, the important ones, were about to be asked.

“How did you manage to escape from Azkaban?” So she was starting with the most recent happenings. Harry was not happy about this, but he had known that it was a possibility she would do that. Voldemort had seen to it that he was prepared. The man had stressed more than once that Harry had to keep his cool in the courtroom and not embarrass anyone. And he thought it more likely that Harry would manage it, if he knew what to expect.

“I changed into my animagus form, slipped through the door as food was brought, and swam to the mainland.”

An excited murmur swept through the room at this explanation.

Madame Bones did not let this distract her, and she continued with the questions.

“Why did you wait so long and only fled when you did?”

“I had no reason until I saw Peter in this picture in the Prophet.” Of course Harry already knew all this and was by now sitting on the edge of the bench, itching to jump up and shout for her to get on with it.

As the DMLE had not been able to keep the information from leaking to the public, despite their best effort, the answer did not shock the watching public as much as it could have. But there was still a rise in chatter, as the news from the various publications was confirmed by Sirius’ answer.

“What was your intention in fleeing from Azkaban?”

“I wanted to catch the rat that was so near my godson. Keep Harry safe and kill the traitor as I had tried that night in 1981.”
Sirius was staring almost unseeing straight ahead, but tears started to build in his eyes. Starting to fall as he blinked the next time.

“Were you, Sirius Orion Black, the Potter’s secret keeper in 1981?” Harry’s breathing quickened, this was the important part.

“No.”

“Do you know who was the secret keeper? And if you do, who was it?”

All in attendance were now holding their breath, and Harry let his gaze wander over the witches and wizards from the Wizengamot, looking for their reaction. He flinched as his eyes came to rest on the witch they had met in the atrium, the one that had been so awful to Remus. There was only hatred in her eyes, inexplicable hatred as far as Harry was concerned.

“Yes, I know who it was. It was the traitor Peter.”

“Please give the full name.”

“Peter Pettigrew was the Potter’s secret keeper.”

More flashes from cameras illuminated the room. Madame Bones called for the court healer to come forward, check on the accused and administer the antidote. Quickly Sirius came back to himself once more, shaking himself as Harry had seen him do in his other form as Padfoot, looking around until his eyes found Harry. He gave his godson a reassuring smile and turned his attention back to the proceedings.

Amelia Bones now started to call the witnesses. Each in turn, as they were brought in from the waiting room, sat in the witness stand and after answering the questions found a place in the audience to watch.

Dumbledore was asked about the arrangement that had been made to protect the Potters and why he had not known about the change in secret keeper or why he had not worked to get Sirius a trial the first time he had been arrested.

The Headmaster explained that it was possible to change secret keepers without the knowledge of the one that cast the spell in the first place, if it was done in the presence of the people hidden and or in the place hidden and with the consent of the current secret keeper. Something Harry was not sure of if he believed it or not.

The questions turned to the happenings of early summer of 1994, the end of Harry’s third year, and Dumbledore’s attempts to convince the Minister of the innocence of Sirius Black. The Headmaster proved to be a master at answering questions without telling much. Harry was not sure if he should believe the Headmaster’s crestfallen look as he admitted that he in fact had believed Sirius to be guilty and therefore had not seen the need to waste time on a trial where nothing new could be found, when so many other trials with dubious endings had to be held.

Then Severus Snape was called and asked about the night Sirius Black had been caught and escaped again.

As far as Harry could see his potions professor answered all questions truthfully, if with his usual unpleasant demeanour.

Soon Harry understood what Voldemort had meant with his words, as he had described trials as mostly boring affairs, at least in instances such as this, where the facts were clear, but no errors
were allowed to happen because someone politically powerful was involved. From witness after witness the same questions were asked, confirming the answers given by Sirius under the truth serum, just to be asked again from the next to be called.

And Mr. Bench, the solicitor Sirius had employed, asked almost exactly the same questions, sometimes only getting some minor detail out of the witness after sitting down again until the next was called.

“Why are you not called as witness, Remus?” Harry wanted to know, whispering his question to the man sitting next to Hermione.

“I’m a werewolf Harry, we're not deemed trustworthy and therefore whatever I have to say, will not be counted. So Mr. Bench will not call me, and neither will Madame Bones.” This explanation was given in a calm and measured tone, only a flash giving away how the well-educated man resented being treated like an animal.

Then Hagrid was called as witness, recounting the night he had taken Harry from Sirius to take him to Surrey and the state the young wizard had been in as he had seen him. As before, some members of the Wizengamot asked clarifying questions, and Madame Umbridge was not nice about it.

After that the aurors that had arrested Sirius were called, giving their recollection of the evidence they had found on the scene and the state the accused had been in.

It was discovered that there had not been an interrogation or medical assessment before he had been shipped off to Azkaban.

After the last auror had answered the questions, being grilled by Mr. Bench over the Ministry's failings, a recess was called.

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Harry stood from the bench, stretching and looking around. The trial so far had been interesting yet surprisingly boring. For him it was absolutely clear that Sirius would be discharged to go home after all this. But despite this, all those officials were going through the motions, asking all those questions. It was maddening.

“I think a snack is in order,” Remus cheerfully stated, looking to the others of their little group for their opinion on this idea.

Ron immediately perked up, his stomach grumbling. The twins were eagerly nodding and Hermione smiled with fond exasperation at the boys.

Harry blushed and cleared his throat. Eating sounded nice, but he had another more immediate problem. “I think I have to use the loo.”

“How about this,” Mr. Weasley stepped in, smiling. “Hermione and I go up and get us all snacks. Remus stays here, making sure our seats will be empty when we return, and you boys go to the loo. We meet again before the break is over?”

“I want a sandwich and some crumpets!” Ron ordered with enthusiasm. “Make sure you get enough!”
They parted ways, Hermione and Mr. Weasley vanished into the crowd on their way up to the cafeteria to get them some snacks, and the boys went down a hall to the bathrooms.

“This trial is kind of boring, isn’t it?” Ron idly asked as they walked through the thinning crowd.

Harry was about to agree when there was a call from behind them.

“Harry, my boy! Wait! I want to speak with you.”

With dread in his stomach, Harry turned and was greeted with the sight of Headmaster Dumbledore in the loud robes he had seen earlier. From closer they did not look one bit better. In fact, they had a pattern of slowly falling leaves and flowers on them that might have looked good on the wall of a child's room, but were decidedly out of place at a trial in front of the Wizengamot.

Meeting the twinkling eyes of the man, Harry noticed with dismay that he felt uneasy in the presence of the old wizard. Only such a short time constantly in the presence of Voldemort and he started to distrust those that he could have trusted the most in the past?

But that was not entirely true, was it? He had thought he could trust him. But now he knew better. Now he knew what the long-bearded wizard had kept from him.

Remembering the lessons on proper behaviour - they had managed to squeeze in quite a few over meals in the days since he had been adopted - Harry inclined his head politely and greeted as was proper. “Headmaster Dumbledore.”

Letting his eyes travel up and down his student, the Headmaster of Hogwarts smiled at Harry, only giving the others short nods, which did not go unnoticed by the Weasley brothers.

“I’m glad that we are able to speak without Tom here,” Dumbledore said jovially, moving their small group a little more out of the way. “I want to assure you that we are working on getting you out of the unfortunate situation you have landed in.”

That sparked Harry’s anger over the whole thing. Unfortunate situation? “And how is this going to work?” The suppressed anger was clear to hear and Ron’s eyes widened in surprise as he realized how angry Harry was.

“Mom was a descendant of the Slytherin line. I am a parselmouth. Do you plan to kidnap me? Force me to live on the run?” His words were clipped and his eyes blazing. Now here was an opportunity to get a few answers out of the old man. At least he could try. He wished he had taken his parchment with questions with him. But he had not truly believed that there would be a meeting between him and the Headmaster.

“Now, Harry, do trust us, we will find a way to free you from…” Harry interrupted the Headmaster, his anger further increased by the soothing manner the words were spoken in. He was no bloody child any more. He might not be an adult either, but he certainly was not five.

“Trust you? When exactly had you planned on telling me that I will be Lord Potter once I turn seventeen? When had you planned for me to learn all I need to know, while others start learning as soon as they can walk? Why did you never check in on me while I was living with my aunt?” Now Harry was trembling, his hands clenched at his sides, his breathing rapid.

Dumbledore was taken aback. It was clear he had not expected so much anger directed at him.

“I always had your best interest in mind. Growing up out of the spotlight, away from the fame over something you would likely not remember.” The attempt at an explanation did nothing to calm
Harry down.

Their not exactly silent exchange had started to gain attention from people walking by, some of them looking in their direction, slowing down to get a better look.

“Your keeping information from me has made this situation more difficult. Now I cannot simply hate him, because he helps me learn what I need to know. Gives me information where you have kept silent. Has cared for me where you appeared not to.” Harry got his portkey out of his shirt, holding it up for the others to see. “Why did I not have had a portkey for my safety? Cedric and I could have fled from the graveyard.” He almost whispered now, only just loud enough to hear over the din from the other hall. “Why did I have to be adopted by Voldemort to get to see my family’s crest?”

Without another word, he walked past the Headmaster and through the door into the bathroom.

Once he got out of the stall again, the twins and Ron were waiting for him.

Harry went over to wash his hands, and splash some water on his face. He felt a little better for getting all this off his chest. Even if he had not gotten any useful answers.

“Living with him is not awful?” Ron sounded really unsure, but eager to know and understand.

Harry nodded, drying his face and hands. “Most of it is actually quite nice. Did I tell you there is a portrait of my father’s parents in the house we now live in?”

The brothers shook their heads. “Wicked! Don’t you think, Fred?” exclaimed one of the twins.

“That it is, George!” agreed the other.

“And that is the problem. I am totally confused. I should hate him, and yet…” Harry trailed off and then shook himself, forcing his thoughts onto another track. “Let’s get back, I’m hungry.” That got Ron beaming, and they all shared a laugh at his grumbling stomach.

But once they came out of the bathroom, they stopped dead in their tracks.

In the hall, unnoticed by the people walking back to the courtroom, a few boys - Harry thought they were a year or two ahead of him in school - were tossing something back and forth between them, and a blonde girl was trying to catch it.

It could have been a friendly game, if not for the cruel taunts and evil laughs of the boys.

“Why do you wear something made of trash, Looney?”

“Dotty, loopy, Looney!”

Harry instantly was enraged again. He could not stand bullies. Purposefully striding in the direction of the circle of boys and the girl in the middle, the teen weighed their chances.

There were five older teenagers, Ravenclaws if he remembered correctly, standing around the girl. The blonde herself only made halfhearted attempts to get back whatever it was the boys had stolen from her. She looked a little like she was not really paying attention, but she did not look happy either.

With Ron and the twins they were four, the girl did not look like she would help, so they were one short.
Deeming that an acceptable risk, Harry stepped into the circle, wand in his hand, catching the flying object with the practiced ease of the seeker.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded to know. With a little confidence he might be able to scare them away, before they realized that they had a real chance at overpowering them.

As the bullies turned to face the one interrupting their fun, Harry sighed in relief as Fred, George, and Ron stepped to his side, wands in hand and concentrated looks on their faces.

At the moment it counted, one could always rely on real friends.

“What is it to you?” asked the biggest of the boys with a sneer. “We were just having fun.” The others agreed and tried to pass it off as some game.

Harry turned to the girl and recognized her as a Ravenclaw, younger than them, he had seen a few times in the Great Hall.

“Did you have fun?” Harry asked her.

“Not really. Actually I thought that I saw some Blibbering Humdingers back here.” She smiled serenely and Harry was struck by her odd appearance, with actual leaves as her earrings and her permanent surprised look. Not sure what he should say or do, Harry held out the necklace made from butterbeer corks to her, which she took with a happy smile and slipped around her neck.

A chime indicating that the recess was nearing its end sounded through the halls, prompting the bullies to leave. And before Harry could gather his wits, the girl with her waist-length pale blond hair smiled and waved, “You are nice, Harry Potter,” just to vanish into the crowd returning into the courtroom.

“Come on,” Ron urged, taking Harry’s arm and dragging him to the door, following the flow of people, “If we wait any longer, all the crumpets will be gone!”

Happy for the moment at the easy camaraderie he had missed the last few days, the raven-haired teen followed his red-headed friends back to their place in the audience.

As he spotted Dumbledore sitting next to Mr. Weasley, chatting about something, Harry made sure that all the others were placed between him and the Headmaster. He did not want to speak to the man at the moment. So best get as much distance between them as he could manage.

And then the next act of the play began.

Marvolo was sitting in the witness waiting room, reading the book he had brought. He had had to hide a smirk as he had first entered the room. The Ministry had not left anything to chance this time around. Every precaution possible for trials was observed. Separating the witnesses from the audience, not letting them listen to the trial, those measures were not often taken.

And so Marvolo had waited in the same room as Dumbledore, the half-giant Hagrid, Severus, and a few others that he did not really knew. As there were aurors stationed inside the room to prevent them from speaking to one another, the peace held. Even if the Headmaster of Hogwarts sat there
with twinkling eyes watching Marvolo the entire time, until he was called to give his testimony.

To pass the time - he was to be called after the recess - Marvolo had brought a comprehensive collection of transfiguration theory. It had been a while since he had studied those, and with the need to repeat his OWLs and NEWTs, he thought it prudent to revise and get a few facts straight in his head. In the practical application it was important to know what all the laws said, but not so much who first had stated them when or what they were named.

The dark wizard almost chuckled over the startled looks of the other occupants of the room and the one auror that came, seemingly accidentally, to stand behind him and sneak a look at the text. The man clearly thought the wizard that claimed not longer to be Voldemort would read some dark text.

If all the aurors were as dimwitted as this one, he better had give up on his plans to get a few into his service.

In time the other witnesses were called, and the room emptied. Finally he was alone, and he heard the chime for the start of the recess. On a table in a corner, a plate with sandwiches and a pitcher with water popped into existence. Storing away his book after marking his place, Marvolo walked over to get a snack.

As not one of the aurors still in the room was brave enough to address him, and he was not really inclined to start a conversation, they passed the break in silence.

Curious as to what his son was up to, Marvolo cautiously lowered his occlumency shields, which he had kept mostly up since they had discovered the link and its reason, to see if he could get any feelings from Henry.

He had peeped a few times during the first part of the trial, but mostly there had not been any strong emotions. And he did not dare try to make the link stronger, or go closer to Henry’s mind. Even if he was quite sure he might be able to look out of Henry’s eyes if he only tried hard enough.

But now there were strong emotions, seeping through the link. Frustration mostly, and anger. What had the boy this upset?

Chewing the chicken sandwich, Marvolo listened, for lack of a better word, to the changing emotions of his son. They quieted down pretty quickly and he thought there would be nothing interesting coming after this, when there was surprise and righteous anger slamming into him so he almost had a visible reaction.

He would have to ask what that had been about. It would be a good way to start a conversation over their link and what he intended to do, so they could live with it, until he found a way to extract his soul piece without harming Henry.

Soon after, the break was over, and Marvolo was finally called into the courtroom to give his testimony. He stood from his chair, shrank the book to place it in his robe pocket and straightened his robes.

With a confident stride he exited the waiting room and made his way over to the witness stand. During his short walk, he searched the audience for his son. He gave a small smile as he found Henry sitting next to his friends, but as far away as he could get from Dumbledore, who had seated himself in the same row next to Remus Lupin.

Henry seemed quite focused and a little curious. A state of mind Marvolo shared. He really wanted to see what Madame Bones wanted to know from him.
He reached the stand and turned to look at the raised seating filled with Wizengamot members and Ministry officials.

The room got eerily quiet.

Madame Bones stood and started the little speech required for every witness, they really did not dare to cut even the simplest part of procedure this time.

“You are Lord Slytherin?” the prim witch formally inquired.

Before Marvolo could answer in the expected way, he was interrupted by a witch somewhere at the back of the crowd before him. “Why should we believe anything he says? He got out of trouble by a mere technicality!”

She sounded properly disgruntled. There was the enmity he had expected over his stunt to use the old law to be cleared of all his old deeds.

Others fell in with this statement, and they got louder, feeling safe in numbers. Marvolo saw Lucius joining in, keeping with the act, and Benjamin smirking, clearly looking forward to another act from his Lord.

Marvolo kept his composure, but let a little sadness over being doubted shine through. After all, he had been under a curse and truly was horrified by the things it had made him do.

Finally the new Chief Warlock let a small bang loose from his wand, getting silence almost immediately.

“I think we can all agree, that it will be not easy to take the answers from Lord Slytherin in unbiased, without a little help. He has quite a past after all.” That got nodding all around. Marvolo subtly inclined his head a little forward, looking more to the floor, projecting mostly hidden shame over the alluded past.

“Maybe an oath to speak the truth,” he was interrupted by calls that this would not be enough, and added “or Veritaserum can take care of this problem.”

To the murmurs of acceptance from the judges, Marvolo raised his head once again, fixing his gaze on the person first questioning his trustworthiness before he looked over to Madame Bones.

“If we can agree on the questions to be asked, I am willing to be questioned under the influence of Veritaserum.”

It was clear that no one, either in the audience nor among the judges, had expected him to agree with this.

But he had contemplated what being called as a witness to this trial could pose for threats and opportunities. And the possibility of Veritaserum had been on both lists. If he could influence the questions, he could build his new image a little faster. It was worth the risk.

With a raised brow Madame Bones floated a parchment over to Marvolo, who gracefully plucked it out of the air to read it.

Calling one of the many quills present in the courtroom to him, Marvolo started to make amendments to the questions written down on the parchment. Mostly they were safe, but some left too much room for ambiguity for his tastes. Such questions could prove dangerous.
After he was finished, he send the quill back to the scribe, a Weasley if he was not mistaken, and the parchment back to a clearly amused Madame Bones.

She raised a brow as she read the first two questions and looked at Marvolo, a question clear on her face.

“As questions that are not easily answered or have too much ambiguity can get dangerous for the person under the potions influence, I would prefer the wording I have written. I do not wish to endanger my health. I have a son, after all,” Marvolo explained in a quiet but determined tone.

Madame Bones inclined her head in acceptance. “Please excuse my surprise. I have not seen a change to the opening questions at all, until now.” After that she turned to the Chief Warlock and nodded. “I agree with the questions as they are written here.”

A chair was brought, so Marvolo could sit down, then the healer and the auror with the vial of the colorless potion came forward. Opening his mouth, Marvolo’s gaze fell onto his son’s face. The boy seemed torn, unsure and very attentive.

The three drops fell onto his tongue, and swallowing, Marvolo felt the haziness take effect. With his occlumency shields he could keep a bit of awareness, but fighting the potion could cause stress to the body. Enough stress in fact that people had died while trying to fight the effects. It was better to go with the flow and only try to influence the wording, slightly, if necessary.

Through the haze he heard the first, adapted question.

“What is the name given to you by your mother?”

He had lived under too many names to be able to answer this question without problem, if worded in the standard way.

Even as he answered he heard the murmurs spread through the room.

“Tom Marvolo Riddle.” It was funny hearing himself sound so out, speaking from far away and not in control of his own body.

“What was the date when you were first born?”

Another adapted question. After all, his regaining of a body had been a birth of sorts.

“Thirty-first of December in 1926.”

Now the basics were down, it came to the questions that he had not altered. The ones that would see Sirius Black free. And hopefully would gain him some good will with his son and the wizarding public.

“Who informed you about the hiding place of the Potters?”

“Peter Pettigrew.” Marvolo breathed in deliberate calm breaths, to force himself not to fight the haziness. It was not easy. Hopefully this questioning would not take much longer.

“Was Sirius Orion Black ever a follower of the man called … Voldemort, also known as You-Know-Who, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, or the Dark Lord?” She was thorough.

“No.” Another question done. Not long now and he would get the antidote and get back his control. He had not anticipated how hard it would be not to fight the potion.
The Head of the DMLE just was about to ask the last question they had agreed on, confirming his former identity as Voldemort, as Lady Longbottom barked a question of her own.

“Are you even able to feel regret for all the grief you have caused?!”

Outraged aurors and a concerned healer looked at the matron. But all this Marvolo did not see.

Under the haze he worked hard to give a somewhat truthful answer without giving away the actual truth. He had no regrets for the deaths he had caused, or the bloodshed and destruction. But he regretted his errors, which led to his loss of sanity. So with sweat starting to form on his brow he answered.

“I regret my past errors.”

He felt his heartbeat quicken, now no longer able not to fight the potion. He did not enjoy not being in control. He really did not.

Before the healer could manage to administer the antidote, another witch, with her high pitched voice, asked a dangerous question.

“What are your political goals? What is your agenda?” She sounded gleeful. And Marvolo wondered if she was aware that these kinds of questions could easily kill someone, as there was no simple factual answer to these questions. The potion had been designed to get facts out of people, simple, clearly well-defined facts. Asking questions about beliefs, morals, or philosophy got into conflict with the need to answer in short sentences and answer the truth. If the mind was conflicted about what “truth” was, the strain could cause heart attacks or a stroke.

His breaths came quicker now, sweat rolling down his face as the potion uselessly tried to make him answer this much too complex question.

He felt his head being tipped back, and the antidote being administered. He swallowed and welcomed back his control. Well, this had gone better than he could have planned. Showing the wizarding public that he was human was something he had to do, if he wanted to be successful on his new path. And no one could claim he had staged this. And the best part was it was actually true.

While he regained his composure, being checked over by the healer, who muttered something about irresponsible witches under his breath, he listened to the lecture Madame Umbridge got to hear from the Head Auror. That woman was trouble. He should appoint someone to gather as much dirt as possible on her.

But for the moment, the healer declared him fit enough to leave, and after a short nod from Madame Bones, Marvolo stood, bowed shortly to the Minister and the Chief Warlock, and walked over to the place his son sat with his friends.

Harry had watched with fascination. He never would have thought that Voldemort would agree to something like this. He had not been able to wrap his head around the fact that the man would give testimony at Harry’s godfather’s trial. But there he was, willingly taking Veritaserum and being vulnerable in public.
The questions were not really interesting, the answers expected. Well, maybe not the one about his birthday. The man was old, much older than he looked.

With widening eyes Harry followed the reactions to the unauthorized questions asked by Neville's grandmother and that horrible witch they had met earlier in the atrium.

And then he watched as Voldemort made his way up the stairs to where they were sitting, to wiggle into the small space between Harry and the older man sitting beside him.

“Everything all right?” the man asked in a whisper, and Harry could only nod as he watched Peter Pettigrew being brought in, chained and fighting every step.

After seeing two wizards taking the potion willingly, the teens now got to watch a wizard being forced to take it. The aurors certainly were efficient in what they were doing, but the healer hovered beside the drugged prisoner as he clearly would fight the potion from the beginning.

The questions asked of the rat animagus were nothing Harry had not thought of. If he had been the secret keeper for the Potters, if he had betrayed their secret to You-Know-Who, if he was a Death Eater.

And the answers were exactly as Harry had expected them to be.

The whole trial was rather anticlimactic. But now the moment his godfather would once again be a free man was drawing nearer and nearer.

Pettigrew was taken away and the judges vanished behind a ward, blocking out all sound. Around them the audience started to chatter.

“Well, they certainly make sure that this time there is no opening for an error in proceedings,” commented Voldemort from the place beside him.

Harry nodded. “I had not believed you, when you said it would be mostly boring, sir. But it was.”

“But after this, he will be free. There cannot possibly be another outcome,” was Remus' comment on the matter.

And nodding in agreement, they all watched the lively discussion held behind the silencing wards.

“What are they arguing about?” one of the twins wanted to know.

“Over a reimbursement,” Voldemort said, his eyes locked onto the faces of the arguing witches and wizards. His certainty earned him some surprised looks. He smirked.

“Reading lips is a useful skill to have.”

Harry saw a spark of interest in the twins' eyes and wondered if they would start to learn lip-reading. He had to admit that it was a useful skill, following a conversation even if you could not hear what was said.

It seemed like an eternity, yet also as if it lasted only seconds, before the wards were dispelled and the din around them died down.

Madame Bones stood, her back straight, her gaze firm.

“Sirius Orion Black, for the charge of murdering Peter Pettigrew, this court finds you innocent.”
Harry breathed deeply, calming his racing heart. He was nervous even though all around him seemed so sure of the outcome.

“For the charge of the murder of twelve muggles, this court finds you innocent.”

Sirius sat in the chair, bound still by the chains, his eyes fixed upon Madame Bones, his expression expectant, hopeful, this had better come out right.

“For the charge of betraying Lord and Lady Potter and their son to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, this court finds you innocent.” Voldemort had flinched beside Harry at the moniker. Musing over his own hated moniker, Harry had to reluctantly acknowledge that the man probably did not really appreciate being called these ridiculous names.

“As all charges that led to the now proven unlawful imprisonment were dropped, you are pardoned for the escape from custody. For being an illegal animagus, you will have to pay the usual fine of one thousand Galleons...”

Harry gasped, that was quite a hefty fine.

“...To be subtracted from the reimbursement of fifty Galleons per day spend in imprisonment.”

That brought an uproar to the chamber. For twelve years of imprisonment, give or take a few days, that would amount to quite the sum.

“You are free to go.”

The chains fell to the floor and Sirius stood, accepting his wand back from an auror, and turning to find Harry’s eyes.

Free at last.

Chapter End Notes

First published: 19th of February 2016
Errands

Chapter Notes

I decided to upload the chapters I have already finished here, without further editing beforehand. I hope to find time later to go over them again. But I wanted to offer what is already written to all those preferring to use this side.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius was relieved. The familiar and long-missed hum of his wand, his very own wand, the one he had bought at Ollivanders when he had been eleven, in his hand. He had thought it had been snapped as he had been carted off to Azkaban. But it seemed that had been another part of the normal procedure that had been ignored, like the part with the trial.

He snorted, straightened his robes, and sought out Harry on his bench, next to the man who had been Voldemort at some point in time.

Exchanging a few pleasantries with the wizards and witches surrounding him – not that he was paying them that much attention – the now freed wizard hurried to make it to the side of his bests friends’ son before that bastard of a Dark Lord could drag him away.

Finally Sirius had shaken the last hand, got the last congratulation, and started to walk to Harry and his friends. Taking two steps at a time, Sirius made his way through the crowd streaming to the exists. He dodged the few not fast enough to get out of his way and finally reached Harry and all those that had come to be his moral support.

With a cry of “Sirius!” Harry launched himself at his godfather and enveloped him in a hug. Closing his arms around the teen, Sirius was a little overwhelmed and smiled at Remus, Arthur, and the kids standing there, beaming. Then his eyes fell on the bastard standing there too, looking solemn.

“Congratulations, Mr. Black,” the wizard with blue eyes said, giving a respectful nod. “I am glad that I could be of assistance in getting the charges dropped.”

Harry released Sirius from his embrace and turned around. “Why 'Mister'? You said the Black family has a seat on the Wizengamot. Shouldn't it be 'Lord Black', sir?”

A sharp jab of pain shot through Sirius at seeing Harry address the man that had murdered his parents in such a respectful manner. But in the same moment he realized that the teen had no other alternative. He had to live with the man, was under his control. If Lord Slytherin decided to do so, he could send Harry to another school, make sure that he didn't get to see his friends again until he was of age. And that was only what he could do and not break any laws.

Sirius had no doubts that breaking the law was not something that Lord Slytherin would hesitate to do.

“He will be Lord Black as soon as he claims the title,” explained the man patiently, confusing the acquitted wizard standing next to him greatly. “I’m not sure if you remember, but I claimed the title of Lord Slytherin the day I adopted you.”
Harry nodded. “I remember.”

Sirius thought that his godson paled a bit, and wondered why. But now was not the time to ask, as he doubted that Harry would be comfortable speaking about his feelings with this big an audience.

But he had another question he wanted to have the answer to. “It was quite the risk to take Veritaserum.”

An eyebrow was lifted. “A calculated risk.” The blue-eyed wizard gave Sirius a thoughtful look. “A risk you took too.”

Sirius nodded, it was true, after all. “But I was pretty sure that no one would ask dangerous questions of me. So, not much of a risk.”

Now it was for Lord Slytherin to nod in agreement. “I had anticipated questions along the line of Dowager Longbottom’s outburst. The one Madame Umbridge asked was a nasty surprise.”

Harry was looking back and forth between the two wizards, one arm from Sirius still slung around his shoulders. “Why was it a risk? Besides having to answer a question you did not want to? What could go wrong?” the teen asked, voicing a question Ron and his brothers would have liked to know the answer to as well. At least Sirius interpreted their interested faces and nodding in this way.

“The potion can be taxing on the system. Some questions demand more than others,” Lord Slytherin answered with a tone that reminded Sirius of the Professors he had had as a student. “But your godfather is better equipped to explain. He was an Auror, after all, and has the Ministry training.”

Sirius saw his earlier assumption confirmed. The man that had adopted his godson was utterly confusing, and happy about it.

Deciding that he was not up to word games with a Slytherin, Sirius turned to the others, frowning after he noticed the missing faces.

“Where are Molly and Ginny?”

Arthur glanced at Lord Slytherin, who looked down at the floor like he was uncomfortable, and then ignored the man, answering Sirius’ question.

“Ginny did not feel well, so Molly took her home.”

Noticing the murderous looks the Weasley boys gave the wizard standing to the side, near them but obviously not part of their group, Sirius realized that Ginny’s not feeling well probably had to do with You-Know-Who.

“I know that it is impossible to make right what happened to your daughter.” They all startled at the honest regret colouring his voice, as Lord Slytherin addressed Arthur Weasley. “I can only repeat that I truly regret the errors of my past.”

He did not offer compensation, and Sirius had to agree that there was no way someone could compensate for what had happened to the only Weasley girl born in a few generations. Smart of the man to not even try, as it would have seemed cheap and as if he did not truly understand.

His eyes narrowing, Sirius wondered if the man was acting, or if it was really true. For the moment, he would assume it all was an act. Maybe someday, far in the future, Lord Slytherin
would manage to earn the trust of the future Lord Black, but Sirius would not hold his breath.

Changing topics again, the newly freed man remembered the reason they all were standing here and started to smile brightly.

“I have made a reservation at a fancy restaurant in the muggle part of London. And then I wanted to go to the cinema and watch a film. I’m not sure what’s being shown at the moment, but I think we’ll find something that we like.”

Feeling Harry tense under his arm, Sirius watched Slytherin and started to search for arguments, so the teen would be able to come.

But before Sirius could start, the man addressed Harry.

“I want you to behave. If there is any incident in which you fear for your safety, use your portkey.” He sounded stern, but not angry or as if he resented the planned outing. “And if you want to be collected to return home, just press this.” He got a small disk out of his pocket and gave it to Harry. “It will notify me.”

The disk vanished into Harry’s pocket, and Lord Slytherin turned to face Sirius.

“Have you been to Griffin house, Mr. Black?”

Sirius could only nod.

“I would like you to drop my son off at around ten in the evening at the latest.” Harry’s smile at that was blinding, and Sirius had to agree, he had not thought that it would be so easy to get to celebrate with his godson.

“If there is a problem, use the disc or send an owl.”

Giving a smile to all in their party, Lord Slytherin inclined his head to the adults. “I will be off then, running a few errands. Oh, before I forget.” And with these last words, the man turned to Harry and started a disconcerting hissing.

A cold shiver ran down Sirius’ spine as Harry answered in the same manner. After a few moments of the hissed conversation, the dark wizard inclined his head again and turned to descend the stairs, walking purposefully to the congregated members of the Wizengamot still standing and talking among themselves.

“That was eerie,” Ron muttered, and Sirius felt Harry tense again. While he agreed with the young Gryffindor, he never would have said it out loud. It was a part of Harry too, and he would always support his godson.

Derailing the possibly dangerous topic, Sirius began ushering his companions out of the courtroom and through the members of the press, dodging their questions. Now it was time to celebrate, not time to answer obnoxious questions.

After he had reached the bottom, Marvolo turned and watched as his son walked off with his
godfather, his friends, and the new history tutor. Before he went to mingle with the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, Marvolo went through the tasks he had to accomplish today.

A little networking, a trip to the Floo office to get Griffin House connected, and a short stop at the Education Department to register himself for the OWL exam in transfiguration. As a last stop he had an appointment with one of the Unspeakables at the Hall of Prophecies.

Henry had been calmer than he had thought the boy would be, as he had told him of this plan. They just needed to know what that blasted bit of divination said. Not knowing was simply too big a risk.

And, well, getting a few test subjects for Severus. But that he would do after he was finished at the Ministry.

Taking a deep breath and fixing the mask of polite, young wizard on his face, Marvolo walked over to the others, almost instantly spotted by Lucius.

“Lord Slytherin!” the blond Lord greeted him, a sparkle in his pale blue eyes. “You are lucky that the healer on duty today was a competent man.”

Nodding, Marvolo easily agreed. “I was indeed. I never had thought that a Ministry worker would be as careless as this... Madame Umbridge?” Several of the people listening nodded in agreement. “I guess the standard in education has dropped in the last few years.”

“Will you press charges?” Benjamin asked with a look of concern.

Keeping a smirk from his own face, Marvolo met his friend's eyes. “I am thinking about it.” Aware of all the others listening in on their conversation, he added a little more, keeping his face contemplative and polite.

“I do not think Regent Longbottom had any ill intent,” he saw the older witch flinch out of the corner of his eye, “so there is no need to press charges against her.” He let guilt wash over his face, and all watching him made the connection to the torture her son and daughter in law had been subjected to. The sympathy and guilt vanished. “But Madame Umbridge is either dangerously stupid, or wanted to do me harm.”

Marvolo then turned to Xerxes, time to sow some doubt about the guilt of Rabastan and Rudolphus. “I am truly sorry about the loss you had to endure, because of things I had started.”

“You did not send my sons after the aurors, Marvolo,” the older looking wizard replied gruffly. As if he wanted to move on. But Marvolo knew his old school friend better than most. They had shared a dorm for seven years, after all. So for him it was obvious that Xerxes had caught on to his intention and helped build a tentative start to getting his sons out of prison.

“No, but I manipulated them.” Marvolo looked away, portraying uncertainty and guilt. “Bellatrix was eager, but your sons. So many of them...” He just shook his head, letting this path of conversation die. To establish doubt about who he now was in those surrounding them, it was a wonderful feeling to deceive the political elite of wizarding Britain. So much better than brute force.

“You intend to take your seat at the next meeting?” Benjamin moved the conversation to safer ground.

“Yes. But until then I have much to do. Starting with getting my OWLs and NEWTs, and building a fortune for my family.”
Lucius perked up at this declaration. Looking contemplative during the allusions at guilt and regrets of past actions, he was working diligently at laying the groundwork for a renewed allegiance between them. “If you need advice regarding the current economic climate, Lord Slytherin, I would like to be of help.”

“Your help would be of great value,” Marvolo said with a few carefully measured traces of gratitude in his voice.

“Before you go,” Xerxes stopped his Lord from turning and walking away. “I am thinking about founding a school in the memory of my late sister. I know you had at one time considered becoming a teacher. I would really appreciate your input.”

Smiling brightly, confusing most of the Lords and Ladies still present, Marvolo nodded with enthusiasm. “Walk with me and tell me what you have planned so far. Maybe I can give you some feedback and pointers.”

And with a cheerful mien and polite farewells, Marvolo left the courtroom at the side of Lord Lestrange, leaving behind a group of witches and wizards who priding themselves in knowing almost everything about the others' families, wondering what sister their fellow Lord had been talking about.

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Albus stood near one of the smaller doors to the courtroom, watching Tom speaking with Sirius and the others who had come as moral support for Harry’s godfather.

The Headmaster wondered what had happened that gave Tom his sanity back. Before the fall in 1981, when he had last seen him, the man and self-fashioned Dark Lord had seemed beyond help. And now he was back to his younger, charming self. A true conundrum.

As Tom walked to the Lords and Ladies standing near the main entrance and Sirius left with the others, dodging the press, Albus turned to leave.

A while, and one apparition, later, he walked through the streets of Godric’s Hollow, passing the memorial for the Potters at the town square, on the way to his childhood home. It lay at the edge of the village, and he had to pass the cottage in which the Potters had tried to hide, back in 1981.

It always pained him to see the ruin. Preserved as a reminder to them all what had been sacrificed to save them.

Now that Tom had changed his tactics so drastically - Albus did not believe that he would resort to open violence again - he had to adjust his approach too. They needed to find and destroy all of the horcruxes the man had made. And to do so, Albus needed to learn how many there were.

Time to find Horace. The man had performed a formidable vanishing act after Albus had sent out his warning to all he knew, about Tom’s return.

Sighing, Albus contemplated again what he could do about the horcrux in Harry. First he had not known what the scar meant, and later he had hoped he erred. But since Harry’s second year and the destroyed diary, there had only been more hints every year. The dreams Harry had reported to Sirius had been the last hint, which finally had convinced him that his assumptions had been right.
And ever since then he had been searching for ways to save the boy. Regrettably, he had come up empty. The only hope he saw to defeat Tom with Harry surviving was if the boy went willingly to his own death. Albus had been glad that his decisions up to that day, keeping his heritage from the boy, had ensured that Harry knew nothing about his responsibilities to the wizarding world, beyond saving it.

And now, as the rant of the teen had proven, Tom had given all this information to the teenager, making him aware that he had a responsibility, things to learn, a goal to work towards. Something that the teen might deem more important than getting rid of a Dark Lord, who had seemingly stopped killing.

As Albus reached the door to the new headquarters of the order, a place neither he nor his brother had set foot in for decades, he opened it and walked in. Was it possible that Tom knew of the horcrux inside the boy he had adopted?

No, it was not possible that he knew. Because if he did, of this Albus was sure, he never would let the teen out of his sight.

So what to do?

Tom would not kill the teen, as in doing so he would lose the political influence, together with his title of Lord Slytherin, so the small chance for Harry to survive was lost. Could he risk letting the boy live and finding and destroying all the other horcruxes first, and getting to Harry last? Or would the political influence Tom got through the boy cause too much damage?

A lone tear made its way down his cheek. Why was it always he who had to make the hard decisions? He loved the boy as if he were his own, but for the good of all of them, he was prepared to sacrifice what he loved.

For the greater good, he would see to it that the horcruxes keeping Tom tied to this world were destroyed.

All of them.

Walking a step behind the Unspeakable who had met him at the entrance to the Department of Mysteries, Marvolo looked around himself. There were high shelves filled with glass orbs. Dust and spiderwebs were everywhere. The only light came from candles in holders fixed to the towering shelves. The blue flames bathed the room in flickering light. Marvolo wrapped his robes closer around himself, it was cold in here.

They walked in silence until they reached row ninety-seven

The man in his dark robes, face hidden under his hood, stopped and stood back. Marvolo took a hesitant step toward the shelf, his eyes roving over the orbs. Some shimmered with some inner light, others were dark like a cloudy night. There were little yellowed tags attached to the shelf under every orb.

Finally his gaze settled on one label that read:
Marvolo’s brow furrowed in confusion. He was not clear on the date he was told the little part of the prophecy he knew. But he was sure that Severus had said he had overheard the prophecy in the Hog’s Head in Hogsmeade. So why was there another location written on this label?

“How does this recording work?” He put as much curiosity into his voice and face as he could, hiding his irritation and confusion under this other emotion. It took some getting used to, feeling this many emotions again.

“We are not entirely sure how it works,” the Unspeakable answered from under his hood. “But we know what it does.”

Glamoured blue eyes locked onto the shimmering globe of glass, Marvolo asked another question. “Is it something magic does on her own?” This was an interesting phenomenon, and it was entirely unclear why these records were being made.

“There are records of a circle of magicians casting a spell to create this hall.” He waved his hand around. “All prophecies made anywhere after the spell was cast, are recorded here.” A sigh ghosted through the air. “To what purpose this was cast is lost to time. The records about the spellcasting are old and mostly destroyed. It seemed a few hundred years ago, there was a fire in the records room, and the wood panels with the texts pertaining to this hall were destroyed.”

A few steps carried the Unspeakable to the shelf, and a pale hand touched the label. “The people involved in the making of the prophecy, the one hearing it and the one speaking it, are recorded. As is the time and place of it. We add the names of the people involved.”

“I heard rumours, that only those a prophecy is about can lift the orbs from the shelves. So how are you able to add the names to the labels?” No time like the present, and who knew when he would find another Unspeakable willing to talk about their research.

“There is always one member of staff that is able to replay the records. We think it is something that was part of the original spell.” Eyeing the other man, the Unspeakable finally asked impatiently, “Do you intend to take it? Or did you only come to watch it?”

It took more courage than he would ever admit, to extent his hand and take the small orb from the shelf. It felt warm in his hand as he closed his fingers around it.

“How do I listen to it?” The man who had once called himself Lord Voldemort - such a childish thing to do using an anagram - wanted to know.

“You could just shatter it, this way it will replay once. Or you could get all whom this prophecy is about, to touch it. This way it will be replayable more than once.”

Nodding in thanks, Marvolo pocketed the orb, casting a cushioning charm on the pocket. No need
risking that the orb would shatter because he bumped into someone.

He thanked the Unspeakable and they walked back to the entrance hall, where Marvolo left to go to Griffin house. Now only collecting some test subjects remained of the errands of today.

ooooo

Coming back from his short break to go to the loo, Kingsley walked along the wall so he would not collide with one of the many people running around today.

He was wearing Alastor’s invisibility cloak and was on his way to his round of watching over the entrance to the Department of Mysteries.

He was not sure what they were guarding there, as Dumbledore had not told them what was so important in there. But he could guess. In there was the Hall of Prophecies. And there had been rumors, rumors about a prophesied savior. Kingsley suspected that they were guarding this prophecy.

He flattened himself against the wall, as he saw Lord Slytherin walking along the corridor, obviously coming from the Department of Mysteries. He started shaking in rage and fear. After the dark wizard had left in the lift, the Auror hurried to get out of the building, without being noticed. He needed to inform the Order. It seemed their enemy had gotten what he had been searching for.

ooooOoooo

Deep in thought Marvolo walked into the study in Griffin House. Transfiguring a small stand for the glass orb and placing it on the desk, the man dispelled the glamour on his eyes. It was an annoying necessity, but leaving them off probably would sabotage his efforts in gaining some trust.

“What is this?” asked the elderly wizard from the portrait hanging opposite from the desk.

“This,” Marvolo carelessly waved his hand at the orb, “is the record of the prophecy that sent me after your son, his wife, and their son.”

“Do you not intend to listen to it?” Charlus wanted to know.

“I do. But I promised Henry that we will listen to it together.” Carding his hand through his hair, Marvolo made his way out of the study, ignoring the next question of the portrait.

He needed to change out of his robes before he went into the big cities in search of some homeless people. So he started on his way to the family rooms upstairs.

He was restless. Since he had met Ginny Weasley this morning, a feeling of guilt had settled into his stomach. And he could not figure out why he felt guilty. He had not felt guilty since the day back in the orphanage when he had smashed the bowl of apple compote. He had been four or five, and they all had been sad that they did not get to eat the sweet dessert.

But now he felt guilt again. Why? What was different here?
He reached his room and slipped out of his expensive silken robes, hanging them on a hanger and putting them back into the wardrobe, all the while not really paying attention to his surroundings. He was lost in his own thoughts, which he had shoved into the back of his mind, not able to solve the problem while he needed to concentrate on his interactions with others, while he had to concentrate on his mask.

The damage done to Ginevra Weasley had not been intentional on his part. It did not achieve anything. It was without a goal, without purpose. Every other time someone had died at his hands, or suffered, he had achieved something with it. Even if it just had been alleviation of his boredom.

This was a possible working hypothesis. Needless death or suffering was just that: needless. And inflicting it made him feel bad. He would have to monitor this, to prove or disprove the theory, but it was a starting point.

Mulling over the conundrum of whether experiments trying to re-create his inflicting unnecessary suffering, would actually work, as the suffering inflicted would have the purpose of experimenting if the theory was correct, Marvolo walked back into the study. Better not to leave Severus’ list behind.

oooOOooo

In high spirits, Harry stepped away from Sirius the moment the dizziness from apparating stopped. They were standing in the warm summer night in the small front garden of Griffin house, just inside the outer wards.

It had been a wonderful day.

But now it was time to return to the house in which Voldemort was waiting for him.

The teenager sighed. How much better it would be if he could return to Grimmauld Place with Sirius. Even if the room here in Griffin house was much better, cleaner, than the one he had shared with Ron in the old Black town house.

“Don’t despair, Harry. I will make sure to get you out of here as much as possible,” Sirius murmured near Harry’s ear, one arm casually placed over the boy’s shoulders. “Maybe we can visit the zoo the day after tomorrow?”

Chuckling, Harry shook his head. “Maybe we get him to agree if you promise that we’ll visit the reptiles.”

They reached the door, and before they could open it, it was opened from the inside, a house-elf peeking out.

“Welcome home, young Master Potter,” the elf squeaked, bowing low and stepping aside, though they could enter the house without tripping over the small being.

Taking a deep breath, fortifying himself, Harry stepped over the threshold into the cheerfully lighted hall. He was relieved as Sirius stepped inside right behind him.

“Master Slytherin is in the Lord’s study,” they were informed by the elf before the little one - Harry would guess it was female – vanished with a pop.
Glancing at Sirius over his shoulder, Harry got a small nod and preceded his godfather on the way to the study.

Only a few steps over the grey rug and they were standing in front of the door to the study. Nothing was to be heard from inside, but they could see the light from the room under the door.

Harry raised his hand and knocked.

“Come in!” Harry heard Voldemort call from the room.

They opened the door and saw Voldemort sitting behind the desk and Professor Snape standing before it. As the Potions Master saw Sirius behind the teenager in the door, he sneered but got his face under control only a second later.

“Mr. Black, thank you for bringing my son back home,” the dark wizard said, while rising from his chair, smiling invitingly at the two standing in the door. “Flimm will show you out.”

A little surprised by this sudden dismissal, Sirius returned the nod Voldemort gave him, and gave a last hug to his godson before he followed the male elf out of the room and the house.

“Come over here, Henry.” Voldemort pointed at a second chair right next to the one Snape was sitting in. “Did you have a nice day?”

Sitting down, with a quick glance at his teacher, who now looked calm again, Harry nodded. “Yes, it was a great day. First we hailed a taxi. Mr. Weasley was so excited. The food was really great, and I liked the film.” He stopped after that, unsure if he really wanted to tell Voldemort, a murderer, about his day with friends. He wanted to tell it to someone, a parent, but that someone could not be the man sitting behind the desk across from him. Or could he?

Shaking his head as if to dislodge the thought, the teenager concentrated on the here and now. It was dangerous to be lost in thought in his present company.

Still smiling, Voldemort settled deeper into his padded chair. “Henry, I have been thinking about ways we can reduce the side effects of our connection, until the time we have a way to dissolve it.”

Tensing in his chair, Harry only nodded, glancing at the Professor, wondering why the man was here.

“There is an obscure art that allows the one using it, to close his or her mind against intrusion. Severus is a master of this art, as am I.” Like every time the man was explaining something, his voice was calm and his tone pleasant, nice to listen to.

“Normally one has to learn Occlumency on his own, because there is no master able to teach it. At the moment I use this art to block my emotions from reaching you. But to really close the connection, you would need to use it too.”

As the man clearly waited for some sort of comment from Harry, the raven-haired teenager slowly looked from one adult wizard to the other. “You want me to learn this… Occlumency?” he asked, hesitating over the new word.

Inclining his head, Voldemort agreed. “It would be beneficial, as Occlumency is also an effective protection against a Legilimens.” To Harry’s questioning look he added an explanation. “A Legilimens, like me or Dumbledore, is able to enter the mind of another, seeing the thoughts and memories of the person. This can happen almost unnoticed, or it can cause pain. If you were to learn Occlumency, you would notice intrusion and could cast the attacker out.”
Furrowing his brow in thought, Harry mulled over the new information he had just gotten.

There were people out there who could read minds? And do so without his being able to notice?

The teenager paled and closed his eyes. “Have you… have you…” He could not get the question out. But he did not need to.

“No, I have not used it to get into your mind.” Voldemort reassured the young wizard.

“I have asked Severus if he would be willing to teach you.” Red eyes focused on dark ones, both wizards nodding to each other. “He agreed.”

With this the Potions Master took over the explanation. “To teach the art of Occlumency there needs to be trust between teacher and student. If you do not think that you can trust me to keep the secrets I inevitably will see in your mind, it might be better for you to learn on your own.”

Turning in his chair, so he could get a better look at the Potions Master, Harry examined the man. Could he trust the teacher who had ridiculed him in every lesson he ever had taught him? The last times they had met, the dark-eyed wizard had been polite, almost cordial. But why? Could he trust this change?

“Why is it better to learn from a teacher?”

“Because it is faster, and you would be able to avoid some pitfalls that can slow you down,” Voldemort answered Harry’s quite question.

“You do not need to decide right now, think about it a few days. You can study a book on the topic until then.”

Harry nodded. A few days time to think about this was probably a good idea. He still had to completely comprehend the fact that he was carrying a piece of a murderer's soul with him. Learning that there were mind readers walking about just added to the feeling that there was nothing safe left in the world.

“Severus, it is time for you to leave.” Voldemort dismissed the professor, not looking as the man rose from the chair, bowed low, and left the room with a murmured, “My Lord.”

Harry started at this obvious sign that his potions professor, the man that had taught him for the last four years, was a follower of Voldemort. A Death Eater. He had known, of course, but seeing him act like one, that was new.

A glass of water was placed in front of him. “You look pale, Henry. Drink something, please.”

Taking a sip of the cold water, Harry’s eyes fell onto a small wooden stand on which a dusty orb of glass was resting. A faint glow surrounded the glass, barely visible in the low light. Setting down the glass, Harry started to reach for the orb, before he realized that it might not be wise to touch something sitting on the desk that was used by Voldemort. It could be cursed or something.

“This is the prophecy.” The soft murmur came from the man on the other side of the honey-coloured desk. “The Unspeakable told me that we can replay it more than once, if we both touch it at the same time.”

Green eyes met red, and Harry was almost sure that he could see uncertainty and worry in the other's eyes as they both extended their hands to touch the fragile looking orb resting on the desk between them.
They hesitated short of touching it. “Whatever it says, Henry, I give you my word that I mean you no harm.” Nodding uncertain – because who would trust a Dark Lord – Harry closed the distance together with the other man.

The orb felt warm, and as soon as both touched it with their fingertips, a small pearly-white figure appeared over it, slowly spinning around its axis. Harry gasped as he recognized the gaudy scarves and big glasses Professor Trelawney always wore.

And then a ghostly voice filled the room as both wizards and the people in the only portrait present listened intently:

*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies.....*

Harry gasped, and all colour drained from his face, he started to shake in his chair, his hand falling back into his lap. He mulled over the words, repeating the part about killing each other over and over.

“Want a calming draught?” his prophesied murderer, or the one he had to kill, inquired from the other side of the desk.

Harry shook his head, and then, as the calm, even relieved voice registered, he quickly looked up. Voldemort looked calm, relieved, and almost happy. Harry was confused, did the man think that it would be easy for him to kill Harry? Was that the reason he was happy?

“It seems this is one of the self-fulfilling prophecies. And that explains the oddities I have seen today.”

“Self-fulfilling?” Harry sounded shaken and hated it.

“You said yourself that Divination is rubbish, did you not?”

Harry nodded, he had said this, after all. And he had believed it, so why did he fear for his life now?

“And even if there are some true prophecies, there are more that never come to pass, than those that do.”

The teenager nodded again, he could believe that.

“Prophecies are always prone to interpretation. Who is the ‘Dark Lord’ in this prophecy? All assume it is me, but can we be sure?” As this clearly was a rhetorical question, Harry chose not to answer, but he could see where this was going. Grindelwald had been a Dark Lord too, so there always had been more than one, and likely there would be more sometime in the future.

“Then the part about ‘thrice defied him’. What constitutes defying? Does it have to be exactly three times? Can it be more?”
Finding confidence again, Harry straightened in his chair, raising his eyes to meet the red ones watching him carefully. “So why did you act on the part you heard?” There was definitely a challenge in his voice. If he did not believe it now, why had he done so then?

“Today in the Hall of Prophecies I got a good look at the label. It states who spoke the prophecy and to whom. That I knew. But it also states the when and where.” He made a pause taking a sip from a glass of water. It was again a rather hot night.

“I was told on the second of May what my man had overheard in a back room of the Hog’s Head in Hogsmeade. But the label said the prophecy was made on the first, in Hogwarts.”

Green eyes widened in surprise, earning him a nod from Voldemort.

“I did a lot of research after being told of the prophecy. Wanted to know all there was to know about them. Most I found was rubbish, just as you so aptly put it. But I found that they can be classified. There are those that will always come true.” The dark haired wizard seemed to search for an example. “There once was a king, Krösus, who asked the Oracle of Delphi for a prophecy before he started a war against a neighbour. He was told that if he were to cross the river Halys, he would destroy a big empire. And he did. He lost everything... even though he thought that he would win, destroying the empire of his neighbour.”

“However this would have played out, the prophecy would have been right. There are many examples of this type. So ambiguous that they can’t not come true.”

“So, practically useless,” stated Harry, gaining himself a nod of approval.

“They are. The next biggest group is the one of self-fulfilling prophecies. They come true, because the people involved make them happen.”

“And you believe this one,” Harry pointed at the glass orb between them, “is one of those?”

“I do, and I think Dumbledore thought the same. If I had never learned of it, I would not have chosen one of the children, never ‘marked’ my equal. It would simply not have come to pass. So after he heard it at Hogwarts, he orchestrated the circumstances, so that it was spoken again, overheard by a Death Eater, to be reported to me.”

Did Dumbledore really do that? Painted a target on unborn children? To get someone able to kill Lord Voldemort? It seemed that he did. The more Harry learned, the less he understood the Headmaster.

But was the word of a murderer enough? Could he trust the man not to kill him? The answer was easy: he could not.

“I do not trust you, sir,” Harry stated firmly, chin raised defiantly, staring the man before him right in the eyes. Mind reading be damned.

With an amused glint in his eyes Voldemort nodded, conceding the point. Given their history, only a fool would have trusted the man without question.

“I don’t want to be a murderer, and I do not want to die. So I demand that you take an oath, or better yet, an Unbreakable Vow.” He felt much less brave than he let on, suppressing the shivers of fear, this could go so horribly wrong. But he needed to do it.

A brow raised in amusement, Voldemort pursed his lips. “And to what words exactly do you demand I make the vow?” the dark wizard wanted to know.
The businesslike tone surprised Harry, he had expected mockery at the very least.

And now he had to come up with words, foolproof words for his protection. He floundered a little for what to say, finally settling for describing his goal.

“That you will not kill me yourself, order me killed, or stand by when another tries to kill me.” Had he covered every angle? Or was there an obvious gap?

He once again was surprised as the murderer of his parents, nodded. “That is a good starting point,” he said, and got parchment and quill.

Almost an hour later, they had worked out the wording for an Unbreakable Vow. Voldemort had made Harry reflect on every word, and how someone might get around his intention by using different interpretations of the words' definitions. He suspected the man had turned the whole thing into another lesson, and he was not sure if he should be annoyed or amused about it.

With the final version written on parchment, Voldemort got up and stretched. Then he got his wand out of its holster, tapping the top of a small snake ornament sitting on the desk with the pale wand two times.

They waited in silence, Voldemort seemed not inclined to talk, and Harry was too nervous to try a conversation. He did not trust this, waiting for the man to start laughing manically or something like that. But that moment never came.

There was a knock at the door, and Voldemort called out a short “Enter!” after which Severus Snape stepped into the room, closed the door behind him, and went down on one knee in a graceful bow.

A cold shiver did run down Harry’s spine observing this. To see the most hated Professor of Hogwarts so deferential to Voldemort drove home the point that they had been right all along. Snape had worked for Voldemort, the proof was there, right in front of his eyes.

“Rise, Severus.” The man clad in dark robes did as he was told, adopting a respectful stance. “You will be our Binder.” Harry saw the man stiffen at this declaration, and it seemed Voldemort had seen it too, because he sneered and, while stepping around the desk to stand beside Harry, said quietly, “Do not fret, Severus. It will be I making the vow, not Henry.”

The dark wizard chuckled as Snape started, and went to kneel, prompting Harry to follow his example.

“The vow is on the desk, Severus.” The tone was authoritative and only loud enough to be heard. Harry started to seriously doubt that this had been such a good idea. He was sure Hermione would have tried to talk him out of it, if she had known.

Kneeling on the floor of the study across from the portrait of his grandparents, staring into the red eyes of Voldemort, Harry attempted to calm his breathing. He wanted this assurance, this additional protection from coming to harm.

They clasped their right hands, and Snape stepped up to stand beside them, wand in hand, handing the parchment to the kneeling teen, his face unreadable.

Harry tried to start with the procedure, as Voldemort had described it, only to let the parchment drop out of his shaking hand.

“Deep breaths, Henry. You can do this.” It was disconcerting how soothing these words were.
Brushing these thoughts to the side, Harry let his left hand fall to his side, raising his gaze to lock eyes with the man kneeling opposite from him.

Reciting the words from memory, Harry started the ritual to bind Voldemort to his word not to kill him.

“Will you, Lord Marvolo Slytherin, refrain from killing or permanently disabling me through any means?”

“I will.”

A small fiery tendril curled from the wand tip and wrapped itself around their joined hands.

“Will you hinder anyone who might be trying to kill or permanently disable me to the best of your abilities?”

“I will.”

Another tendril of fire joined the first, wrapping around the first one and their hands.

“Will you not order your followers to attempt to kill or permanently disable me or get others to do so?”

“I will.”

A third tendril joined the others, forming a red-glowing rope that started sinking into their hands.

Harry took a deep breath. He had done it, he had gotten an Unbreakable Vow from Voldemort that he would not attempt to kill him. It was not without loopholes – he had learned that it was almost impossible to formulate a vow without them – but it gave a certain measure of safety.

Sitting back on his heels, Harry rubbed his eyes tiredly, only barely registering Snape leaving. All in all, it had been a truly remarkable day.

Standing in the front garden of Griffin house, Severus passed a shaking hand over his face. He could not quite believe what he had been part of a few minutes prior. The Dark Lord had sworn an Unbreakable Vow not to kill Lily’s son.

Hearing the word ‘Binder’ from his Lord had been a shock. He had feared that Harry -- he still struggled what to call the boy in his own head -- would be made to swear the vow. But learning that the Dark Lord would be the one... that had been a much bigger surprise. He had needed all his long practice in controlling his emotions not to start laughing hysterically.

Calming his mind with the practiced actions of an accomplished Occlumens, Severus prepared to apparate. There was an Order meeting planned for this evening, and he was already late.

Moments later the Potions Master was standing in the overgrown garden behind the new headquarters. He was not happy that the house stood in the village that had been the last place Lily had lived in. It was surprising, but he wished they were still meeting in the mutt’s house in London.
He quickly made his way to the house, avoiding the wild roses and their thorns, through the corridor and the shabby kitchen to the dining room, which they used as their meeting place. Dust was thick on the carpets, puffing up in little bursts with every step he took.

The others were already there, the message Albus had sent him via his Patronus had said it was a small meeting, and so he slipped into one of the chairs a little more in the shadows of the room.

Briefly making eye contact, they exchanged a small nod, before the Headmaster rose, drawing their attention to him.

“I have called you here to inform you that Voldemort was in the Hall of Prophecies today. Kingsley saw him leaving from there after the trial today.”

Moody leaned forward in his chair, his blue eye swirling like mad. “Do we know if he has taken it?”

Minerva listened intently, shooting covert glances at Severus, or what she as a Gryffindor considered covert glances. Her concern for him was equally as heartwarming as it was annoying. Deceiving Dumbledore was easy, the man had always been a manipulator, using his guilt against him. But Minerva had always been kind, even if she had done nothing to curb the Marauders' bullying. It was harder to lie to her.

Remembering the glass orb standing on the desk in Griffin house, Severus weighed his options. Telling the Order that the Dark Lord had indeed taken the prophecy would gain them nothing of substance, but it would cement his position. How ironic that he had made the same choices for his position in the Dark Lord’s ranks not so long ago.

“He has,” was all he said, but it made the others shut up and look at him.

“Don’t be so difficult, lad,” Moody groused gruffly.

“I was called to his current residence this evening. A glass orb was resting on a stand on his desk.” He sneered at their shocked faces, white as if they expected to hear that Harry had already been killed. Only Dumbledore seemed unfazed. Almost as if he was waiting for something, hoping maybe. Severus filed this observation away, to think about it at a later time.

“He wanted to discuss lesson plans with me, coordinating the potions lessons with the lessons in history, dancing…” He trailed off and decided to add a little more, to make the act believable. So he donned his most hateful sneer and laced his voice with contempt. “Just as I was leaving Black brought the brat there. I have no doubt that he is well.”

“Thank you, Severus, we all appreciate the dangers you brave to bring us information,” Albus said with the infernal twinkle in his eyes.

Minerva nodded to this declaration, but Moody sneered, the paranoid ex-Auror had never trusted the lone spy the Order had.

From there the Headmaster declared that they had to find Horace Slughorn. But he never said why it was so urgent. He only alluded to the need to speed up their plans, now that Voldemort had learned of the prophecy's content. Severus flinched at the name as he had always done, even if the cause for this reaction no longer existed. With the changes to the Dark Mark, his Lord had removed the pain triggered by his name. Nothing the Order needed to know.

And so Severus Snape listened to the Order members plotting and planning, committing everything to memory and silently mulling over the things he had seen today. He never would have guessed,
that night at the end of the school year, that keeping Lily’s son safe would be easier once he was under the Dark Lord’s control.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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After days of frequent and careful correspondence by owl, Lord Xerxes Lestrange was sitting in a nice little café in the centre of London, occasionally sipping from his glass of ginger lemonade. He was nervous and fiddled with the sleeves of his brand new suit. Lucius had recommended a tailor, descendants of a Squib, who worked fast and produced quality.

Every time the door opened, Xerxes looked up. It was ridiculous how nervous he was. On the other hand, it was understandable. He was about to meet his nephew and his wife, both non-magical. It was the first time he would interact with Muggles. So being nervous was to be expected.

Checking that the briefcase he had brought was still standing under his chair, the current Lord Lestrange took a deep breath to calm his nerves. There were not many people in the café, it was a Thursday and early afternoon, so most Muggles in the city were still at work.

Finally the door opened to admit a man and woman, followed by a young girl with bushy brown hair. They were in high quality clothes: skirt, blouse, and Mary-Jane shoes for Hermione, her mother was in similar attire, the father wearing a suit.

Thanking Lucius for his hints at how to dress for Muggle London, Xerxes rose from his seat and was promptly spotted by the young witch.

Xerxes stood beside his chair, smiling invitingly and inclining his head in greeting. “Doctor and Doctor Granger, I assume?” Snape had explained that the title of Doctor in the Muggle world was equivalent to the title of Master in their world. A great accomplishment that should be acknowledged.

“That is right,” nodded the father of his sister’s granddaughter, “You are Mr. Lestrange?” He sounded unsure about the title.

But Xerxes nodded, his title of Lord better stayed out of their conversation, as long as they were in public in Muggle London. “I am.”

Gesturing for them to sit, he pulled the chair out for Mrs. Granger to sit down, while Mr. Granger did the same for his daughter.

Taking his own seat, Xerxes started the conversation to avoid an awkward silence. “I’m glad that you agreed to meet with me. You probably don’t know how pleased I am to be able to get to know you. I never got over the separation from my sister.”

“So my mother really was your sister?” the brown-haired man, with a short haircut, wanted to know, getting a menu lying next to his place, where Xerxes had laid it earlier.

“The ancestry test your daughter had done proves it.”

“But Mum always told us her family died in a big fire while she was in her last year at school.” Mr. Granger sounded sad, but there was curiosity in his eyes too.

Sadness welled up in Xerxes and he did nothing to prevent it from showing on his face. “I can understand why she would do this.” He sighed. “The magical world is not a nice place for Squibs
at the moment, and our parents pretended that there never was a daughter.”

The incomprehension over such behaviour was clear as day on the faces of the older Grangers, their daughter looked like she wanted to strangle someone, and Xerxes remembered the tale about her quest to free all house-elves that Severus had told. If he made the right moves, he might get closer to her by involving the young witch in his plans for a school.

“I want to change our world to be more welcoming of Squibs. Starting with the founding of a school.” Hermione’s eyes lit up at this. As Xerxes had known they would. “I have much planning to do still.” He smiled and got the briefcase out from under his chair.

“I brought an album with pictures from our childhood.” He brandished the small leather-bound book.

“As have we.” A smiling Mrs. Granger said, getting a big album out of her elegant bag.

In this moment the waiter came over and they all ordered cool drinks, cake and ice cream.

After that they started trading stories, about the time Xerxes and Dorcas had wanted to make a cake for their mother and ended up covered in flour and eggs, or the one summer Fabian, Hermione’s father, had found an injured bird and insisted on caring for it.

The older Grangers were fascinated by the moving wizarding pictures and Xerxes asked if their daughter never had shown them pictures from school. A little sheepish, Hermione said that she had no wizarding pictures of herself or her friends.

That was something that he could easily fix.

They had a very enjoyable afternoon with stories about the childhood of both Xerxes and Dorcas up to the day that her Hogwarts letter didn't come. Mrs. Granger and her husband told about the childhood of Fabian and Hermione. They talked about the dental practice of the doctors, and the estate Xerxes was managing. And as he only ever had gone to Hogwarts, Xerxes asked the Grangers for pointers of what he should include for a primary school that would educate young magical children, both from the magical world as well as those that were born in the muggle world. He even told them about his tentative plans to expand the school for children over the age of ten who did not get a Hogwarts letter.

They parted later, as the sky started to grow dark, with plans to meet again very soon.

On his way back home, apparating from a small side alley, Xerxes contemplated his first ever meeting with people from the Muggle part of Great Britain. The parents of his grandniece, his nephew and his wife, were intelligent and polite people. They had manners and a sense for good food. It had been they who had decided where they would meet. He had thought it prudent to give them the advantage of choosing the place for their meeting, as he had the advantage of magic.

Stepping into his manor, he walked straight to the library, and from there to his study and the liqueur cabinet. Filling one of the small crystal tumblers with his favourite brandy, he walked over to the French door, opened it, and walked out into the small garden, smelling of herbs in the warm evening breeze.

Marvolo had approved his plans for a school. They both agreed that they had to change the way Squibs were educated to keep them in the magical world. To combine this school with one for the younger children was only logical. It was a chance to integrate the Squibs with the Magicals of their age. It was nothing that would change their world overnight, but they had to start somewhere,
and starting with the children was the wise thing to do.

At home in her room in her parent’s house, Hermione sat on her bed, staring at the bookcase filled with her favourite books, playing with her hair and thinking about the meeting with the brother of her grandmother.

It was surreal to think that her great grandparents had been magical, that she was related to Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange, the criminals - Death Eaters - sitting in Azkaban.

But Xerxes Lestrange, the current Lord and head of the family, the man with the friendly smile and the long grey hair she had meet today, was nice. He had spoken about his sister with such sadness and fondness in his eyes, Hermione did not think that he could have faked the emotions.

She sighted, frustrated. Lord Slytherin had said that he and Lord Lestrange had been in school together. The man had called him a friend. So had he agreed with the goals of the man that was called You-Know-Who? Had he been a Death Eater like his sons?

Hermione felt torn. Her parents had always told her not to judge people based only on things others said about them, not to judge by appearances alone. But could she risk taking the time to get to know him better? Was she even able to really get to know him? She had suspected that he had been a Slytherin, and he had confirmed her assumption this afternoon. So he probably was able to hide his true intentions and manipulate those around him to reach his goals.

Was she about to become a pawn on the chessboard of Headmaster Dumbledore and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? She truly hoped not, because she wanted to contribute to the school Lord Lestrange was planning. She was sure that she would have been a lot happier as a small child had she known that she had magic. Attending school with others just like her, not the outcast concentrating all her energy on studying to get the teachers’ attention.

Huffing a sigh, she stood up and went to the bathroom. She was tired and wanted to take a shower. Maybe standing under the warm water would help clear her head.

After the trial on Monday, Harry’s days started to take on a pattern. He had history lessons with Remus, whom he again called Professor Lupin while they were at Griffin House and in the small school room with the view of the overgrown back garden, every day for an hour. And he did not complain, never had History of Magic felt more real. Remus was a really excellent teacher.

Every other day the teen flooed over to Nott House for his lessons in Ancient Runes and an afternoon flying session with Theodore. Runes quickly became a favourite of his, and he regretted that he had not selected the subject instead of Divination in his third year. And after he had watched Voldemort putting wards around a filing cabinet in the study, he was even more eager to learn.

Evenings he often spent in the study in front of his grandparent’s portrait, listening to the Potter
Family History. He loved those conversations, about his parents, the ways his family had worked with the others on the Wizengamot, the ideals they had stood for in the past. Voldemort never was present for these talks and Grandfather Charlus – as he insisted on being called – had explained that these things never were discussed with someone outside of the family.

Harry had been bemused at the thought that the man who was called a Dark Lord by his followers would abide by any rules. But as they started the same lessons about what the Slytherin family stood for, who their allies were and so on, he quickly learned that the man obeyed the rules because he valued them as tradition. That Voldemort valued anything was a strange concept, but Harry could not prove otherwise, and it was the only explanation fitting the evidence right in front of his eyes.

After the man had made the unbreakable vow not to kill Harry, the green-eyed teen had relaxed. Not by much, but noticeably. He slept much better now, and he had an easier time asking questions. Why he had agreed to Harry's demand, the teen did not know and did not dare to ask.

The man was behaving oddly, Harry mused, sitting in the school room, waiting for his next teacher. Only moments ago Harry had seen the red eyes bright with fury and heard the smooth voice full of anger.

Sitting at the pupil's table, a book about potions in front of him, Harry let the last few hours replay in his mind.

It had been his first lesson on dancing, posture, and proper manners for the ballroom and “social functions”, as Voldemort had called them. The haggard witch that had flooed into their reception room next to the hall had bowed low to Voldemort, greeting him in the way Harry had seen from Snape. So she probably was one of his followers, but probably not a Death Eater. She looked more as if she would be blown away by a strong gust of wind, and not as if she would be able to fight or duel any length of time.

Fifteen minutes into the lesson, only the knowledge that he needed to know all of this kept Harry from yelling at the woman and stomping out of the dining room. The elves had removed the chairs and the big table so they had enough room, and the witch made Harry prance up and down the whole room, criticizing his posture and the way he walked in a shrieking voice and with scolding words.

More than once the spindly hands grabbed the boy, forcing him into a stance that felt entirely unnatural. After the tenth time, she started to use stinging hexes on him whenever he slumped or let his shoulders slack forward. The first yelp from the teen had brought him another round of choice words about his utter lack in manners and got the old woman wondering what he had learned up till now.

As the door had opened and Voldemort had stepped into the room, Harry had yelped again, rubbing the spot on his back where another stinging hex had landed. Harry had spotted the angry look on Voldemort's face and taken a step back, expecting to get yelled at because he did not pay enough attention, was not working hard enough.

But then the teen's eyes had widened further and further, as Voldemort had told the old witch off, asking whether or not he had said that no means of physical punishment or encouragement – the last was said with a sneer – was to be used. After a good ten minutes of this, the witch was sent away.

Before sending Harry to work on his summer assignments, Voldemort had promised to find another teacher. Harry was not sure if this was meant as a threat or not.
The whole situation was utterly confusing, but the evidence that Voldemort would keep his word started to pile up.

Yesterday he had been over at Sirius’ place for tea. And tomorrow he would see the man again. It was nice to visit, and he would have loved to live with his godfather, but he could not deny that his room here in Griffin House was much better than the one he had shared with Ron the short time he had stayed at Grimmauld Place.

The world would be perfect, if Harry could live with his godfather here in Griffin House.

But visiting was better than nothing. Or so he repeated over and over in the hope that he could convince himself.

The most confusing lessons were two times a week with Professor Snape. One lesson was on potions and the other, the one he was waiting for at the moment, was Occlumency.

Harry already knew what to expect from the potions lessons. The last one, the day after the trial, had confirmed his suspicion. He was made to revise all the basics. The first lesson had been on the various cutting techniques used in potion-making. And the last one, on the day after the trial, had been on stirring.

He had learned of the right way to hold a stirrer. Why there were so many different forms and materials used. And most enlightening: what the effects were if one was stirring clockwise compared to the effect a counter-clockwise stir had.

So much of his past problems with potions, understanding the why and how, now were clearer to him, and his early enthusiasm for the subject made tentative steps toward reappearing.

But Occlumency lessons were unknown territory. Harry tried not to think too much about it, not to speculate. Because he knew that his imagination was prone to come up with the worst scenarios it could conjure. And that was oh so helpful... not.

Forcing himself to return to his assignment, the teen started as the door opened and his most hated Professor from the last years came in with black billowing robes.

Harry scrambled to get to his feet, nodding his head in greeting.

“Mr. Slytherin. How nice of you to be punctual,” his teacher's deep and silky voice acknowledged his greeting. The words were similar to those the man had always used, but there was missing a certain... bite.. to them.

“Sit down,” the man ordered him and walked over to the desk reserved for the teacher, right in front of the blackboard that was hanging between posters with images of various magical creatures on the right, and different poisonous plants on the left.

Harry did as he was told, and closed his book, moving it off to the side. Anticipation and nervousness were fighting a battle inside of him and he was not sure which was winning.

“As you should know,” Snape raised an eyebrow at this. “We are here so you can learn Occlumency, to close the link between you and the Dark Lord from your side.”

Harry nodded, not feeling that this needed an answer from him.

“As the study of Occlumency requires a certain amount of trust of the pupil for his teacher, and our past was not conductive to forming trust,” another raised brow, “I intend to start there.”
The teenager kept a frown from his face, that was a rather ominous start.

“I assume that you have many questions about me, my intentions, and loyalties.” Harry studied the professor’s expression. If he was reluctant to talk about himself, it did not show in the man’s pale face. “You may ask every question you want. But I reserve the right not to answer if they are too personal.”

With that said, the man leaned back, crossing his arms in front of his chest. Not a really approachable pose. But Harry was not ready to let himself be intimidated. He had spent almost a week alone in a house with Voldemort, he could cope with the antics of his potions teacher.

“What do I need to trust you, for you to teach me Occlumency?” A brief expression of surprise flashed across the dark-haired wizard’s face. That obviously was not the question he had expected.

“Because to test your shields and to help you build your proficiency, a teacher for the art of Occlumency needs to enter his or her pupil’s mind. It is impossible to not see those things the student most wishes to hide in the first lessons.”

Bright green eyes widened. Snape would enter Harry’s mind? See his secrets? His fears? He would really prefer to avoid this.

“If there is not a sliver of trust for the teacher, the lessons can become more torture than actual lessons to learn to shield.”

That sounded about right. Having someone you did not trust enter your mind and seeing your most embarrassing moments. Harry was not sure that he would be able to do this with Snape.

“You will have to trust me not to reveal what I see to others and not to comment on or judge what I will learn.”

Harry gave a shaky nod. He needed to learn how to shield his mind, to keep Voldemort out of his head. And as he had learned from the few books he had read over the last few days, it was much easier to learn the art if one had a teacher. And it would be a cold day in hell if he allowed the dark wizard into his mind willingly. So Snape it had to be.

Taking a deep breath, Harry fixed his gaze on Snape’s form, casually leaning onto the desk, arms still crossed.

“Why do you hate me?” Because it was more than simple dislike. It had to be hate for the man to cut him down with harsh words at every opportunity, for taunting him and his friends. More than what could be explained by the Slytherin Head of House’s dislike for Gryffindors.

Professor Snape closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Taking a deep breath of his own he started his answer, or more of an explanation, in a low voice.

“Hated. I do not anymore.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at that. He would believe it as soon as he got to see the change.

“And several reasons. None of them your fault, Mr. Slytherin, at least at the beginning.” He let his arm fall and opened his eyes, looking directly at Harry.

“A big part played my deplorable past with James Potter and his merry band of friends.” A sneer settled in on the professor’s face. “You look entirely too much like your biological father.”
Harry rolled his eyes, he had heard it too often ‘just like your father’, and trust Snape to make the distinction between a biological and an adoptive father.

“Another part is that it is... was... quite painful to look at you.” Seeing the questioning look from the boy, the older wizard explained more. “Your eyes are exactly like your mother’s. And she was my first and best friend until I said something incredibly stupid to her. Her becoming a target made me go to the Headmaster for help. I blamed you for surviving where she died.”

Snape and his mother had been friends? Somehow it was hard to imagine the man as a child. Harder still to see him being the friend of his mother, a Muggle-born witch.

But, wait, Snape went to Dumbledore because Lily had become a target? And Dumbledore had sent him to Voldemort the night after the third task.

But first... “What has changed? I look the same as I always did.”

With a calculating look Snape started to pace.

“You are aware that I am the one brewing your potions?” He gave Harry a pointed look as the teen puzzled over this cryptic remark.

He flushed with mortification as he realized that the Potions Master knew about the damage done by the treatment he had received at the hand of his relatives. Was it pity that had changed the perception?

Harry raised his eyes from the floor up to Snape. There was no pity in the man’s eyes, only calm knowledge.

Deciding to let the questions on this particular topic rest, Harry changed to the other question haunting his mind.

“Are you still a spy, sir?” He could not keep the curiosity out of his voice.

“I am,” was the simple reply.

“Does he know?” Still unsure where Snape’s loyalties really lay, Harry did not specify whom he was referring to.

A knowing smirk graced a pale face as the teacher stopped in his pacing and turned to face the teen. “They both know that the other thinks me to be his spy.”

It took Harry a moment to make sense of this convoluted sentence. “And how does it come that they both trust you? He said that both him and Dumbledore are Legilimens.”

Nodding in confirmation Snape answered, “They both are. But I am an accomplished Occlumens, enabling me to lie to both of them.”

“I can see Dumbledore believing you, but not him.”

“Headmaster or Professor Dumbledore,” chided the Potions Master, starting to pace again, deep in thought. Finally he came to a decision and turned again to face the teen.

“The Dark Lord made sure that I am trustworthy, through means you do not need to know. He discovered that I am committed to keeping you safe.”

They both stayed silent for several minutes after this, both lost in their own thoughts, until Snape
started the lesson.

Thankfully it was mostly theory in this first lesson, ways Harry could use to come to a calm state of mind, ways he should test over the next week to find the method that worked the best for him.

As Professor Snape repeated several times during the lesson, each mind was different, as was each person, so each individual had to find the method to use that worked for them.

ooooo

Later the same day, in the biggest bedroom in his dreary house in Spinner’s End, Severus Snape stood clad only in shirt and trousers in front of his wardrobe, peering in.

As he had come home from his tutoring session for his Lord’s son, Severus had found an owl sitting on the fence surrounding the small front garden. If one could call the overgrown and dry patch of land a garden. The owl had carried an invitation written in elegant, loopy cursive with expensive dark green ink on the most posh parchment one could buy. Severus scoffed just remembering the extravagance now lying on his desk in his workroom.

He had been invited to the yearly summer party held at Malfoy Manor. And now he tried to decide what he could wear to this unavoidable social gathering. He held no illusions as to what Narcissa intended, inviting him. She would try to find him a witch to marry. And he supposed that he should accept her assistance. Because, like it or not, he needed to find a partner within the year.

Looking at his entirely black clothes, with only his undergarments and shirts in white and the colour of unbleached or only half-bleached linen, Severus thought back to the Occlumency lesson from that afternoon.

Pot… no, not Potter anymore, Slytherin had not asked questions as dumb as he had expected him to. In fact he had asked quite astute questions. The one about the reason for his hate was one he had contemplated, but not believed the teen would ask. But maybe he had underestimated the boy’s Gryffindor bravery.

But his own answer had surprised him even more. It was true, he had hated the sight of Harry Potter, the clone of his childhood tormentor James Potter with the copy of his best friend's eyes in his face. It had been a special kind of torture to look at the child of his best friend and his schoolyard nemesis. But to learn that the boy had not disregarded his education of the proper ways to behave as an heir to one of the old families, but had never received such in the first place, had corrected many of his misconceptions.

The fact that his aunt and uncle, and perhaps their son, had abused Lily’s son, to an unknown extent, made it impossible for him to see his student in the light he had before. No, he needed to start fresh, to get to know the boy, to be able to keep him safe.

It seemed he had moved on from grieving for his best friend. He contemplated the black clothes. Black, the colour of grieving. He had always preferred the dark colours, but never before her death had it been exclusively black. He never made a conscious decision to do so, but it seemed that he had not only mourned in private for her all these years. But most likely no one had realised.

He supposed it was finally time to move on. So a trip to the tailor was in order. He sighed and closed the doors to his wardrobe. Maybe he could set up some kind of stipend or something similar...
in Lily’s name. To pay for an apprenticeship for a muggle-born. He hummed. That thought had appeal, if he spun this right, he might get his Lord’s approval, and Dumbledore certainly would support him in this.

With new determination and plans forming in his mind, Severus put on the robe and shoes he had discarded earlier. If he wanted new robes for the Malfoy’s party, he needed to order them today.

oooOOooo

Benjamin felt uncomfortable, he was wearing a muggle suit and followed Rowle through some of the shadier parts of Muggle London. None of the others were there, only the two of them searching for the little wizard living on the streets.

Yaxley had wanted to come as well, but their Lord had decided that it would be wise only to send those that the boy already knew or would get to know soon.

He wished they had found the child already and could go home. He would take a really nice hot and long bath once he was back.

In the pocket of his light coat Benjamin had a potions vial of the concoction Severus had brewed for the purpose of blurring past memories and dampening their emotional hold on a person. He was to give it to the child, so he would have an easier time adjusting to his new life in the wizarding world.

Alongside the vial, the pocket held adoption papers. The muggle variant. Over the last few days, Benjamin had tracked down the boy’s parents and planted the necessary paper trail to let it seem as if he had started the process of adoption at the appropriate time to get to adopt the boy today.

He sneered, remembering the poor excuses for parents he had met. He could understand why the boy preferred to live on the street to living with his parents. The little flat had reeked, and he had seen a rat scurrying along a wall. The adults were dirty as well, with matted hair and unclean teeth, and were uncouth in their behaviour. He had not even tried to reason with them, he just had cast the Imperius on them and got them to fill out the papers granting their permission for their son, Aiden, to be adopted.

And now they walked from spot to spot asking other homeless children where they might find Aiden.

Rowle waved Benjamin forward, pointing to a small form hunched over in a corner behind a big rubbish container.

Nodding to the other wizard, Benjamin made a little detour so he could approach the child from the front so as not to startle him. Rowle took a position along the other wall of the narrow alley, so he could monitor both ways in and prevent the boy from running, should he try to escape.

“Aiden?” Benjamin called out to the small child with his dirty blond hair, curled into himself as if he was cold.

The boy’s head snapped up, brown eyes looking cautiously up to the wizard.

“Are you Aiden?”
The boy shook his head, no he was not Aiden.

Benjamin felt cold fury rising. Another child on the streets, what were the muggles thinking? Children were precious gifts, and nothing to be cast to the streets!

“Do you know him?”

An enthusiastic nod was the response.

“Do you know where he is?” Benjamin was speaking in a gentle tone, crouched near to the ground so as to appear less threatening.

The boy nodded again. “The man took him with him.”

A cold shiver ran down Benjamin’s spine. Had they come too late? And the way the child spoke of the man suggested that he was not an unknown figure to the children.

“When? And where did they go?” Urgency was clear in the wizard’s voice and he felt the other tense behind his back.

“Just before you came. And they went down there.” The boy pointed at the other alley opposite from the one the two wizards had come from.

“Thank you.” Benjamin smiled, rose, and started to run down the alley the boy had pointed at. Normally it was beneath a Lord to run like a common muggle, but speed was of the essence, and as he did not know where he might find Aiden, he could not simply apparate to get there.

Silently he promised himself to find a way to get this young muggle boy off the streets, not even animals treated their young in this manner.

Nearing the end of the alley, they could hear the muffled pleas of a child, “No, let me go, I don’t want to come. Let go!” And the snarled response of a man demanding he be quiet.

Rounding a corner, Benjamin only took a moment to assess the situation. There was a muggle contraption standing on the street, seats inside and a door opened, a tall and lean man in what appeared to be casual muggle clothing tried to get a boy into the thing on wheels, but the boy struggled with all his strength.

“Stupefy!” The man fell, stunned and unconscious, the child spun around, searching for the source of the shout.

Wary eyes found the two men running towards him, and he tensed, only to relax again as he seemed to recognize Rowle.

Benjamin could not restrain himself from falling to his knees next to the boy, embracing him tightly, assessing if there was any damage.

“You’re the man that unstuck the creep from the wall,” the boy stated in a detached manner, shock most likely, Benjamin noted.

“That I am, little one!” Rowle said with amusement in his voice, ruffling the boy’s hair, before he aimed his wand at the muggle that had tried to abduct a young wizard, levitating the man into his means of transportation.

“Has he hurt you?” Lord Nott asked, easing back a little to get a better look at the child he intended
to adopt.

The boy shook his head and started to chew on his lower lip. His eyes, a warm brown colour, wandered from the man kneeling by his side, to the one working inside the muggle vehicle - at least that was what Benjamin assumed it was - creating a scene believable enough to explain missing memories.

“Are you wizards?” the boy wanted to know, studying their faces attentively.

“We are,” Benjamin confirmed, squeezing the boy’s shoulders in reassurance. Noticing the slight flinch, the widower chided himself, the boy probably would develop severe bruising on his arms, the way the filthy muggle had manhandled it.

Retrieving the potions vial from his pocket, what he planned was a betrayal of sorts, but he quieted his conscience with the knowledge that his future son would have to take it anyway and that it would do no harm. Severus had said the child would get sleepy and wake hours later, mouldable to new circumstances by being told the facts of his new truth.

“Here, take this.” Benjamin removed the cork from the vial, holding it out for the boy to take. “It will heal you and let you sleep. When you wake again, we will be at home.”

With approval Benjamin noted that the boy was suspicious of his declaration. “What do you mean, ‘at home’?”

Chuckling, Benjamin reached into his robes, retrieving the shrunken adoption papers. Waving his wand over them and restoring them to their original size, he turned them so that Aiden could read them. “I want to adopt you. You are a wizard, and should live in our world.”

Watching the child read the papers, the warmth of affection blossomed in his chest. “I have a son. He is older than you are. And he looks forward to having a younger brother.”

The boy looked up, locking gazes with Benjamin, the wizard could see a spark of hope in them. Smiling encouragingly, he again extended the vial for Aiden to take.

With new-found determination, the young wizard born to two despicable, non-magic humans took the vial, scrunching his nose at the not-quite-appetizing smell, and pinching his nose drank it down in one big gulp.

“Good boy,” praised Benjamin, steadying the child as he started swaying on his feet. Only moments later he lost his fight against sleep, and Benjamin lifted him into his arms, to carry his second son.

“I’m finished here,” proclaimed Rowle, and without further delay they disapparated to their respective destinations, leaving the muggle behind in the alley, where a fire started to reach for everything inflammable.

ooooOOooo

Waiting in a chair in the reception room of Griffin House, Marvolo reassessed his decision to find a mind healer for his son. Mr. Lupin, as well as Severus, had advised him to find someone that could help the boy to cope with all the traumatic experiences he had had. Severus had only been brief,
when Marvolo had asked the man what he thought of Henry’s reaction to the punishment he had given the boy for his disrespectful behaviour. Severus had assured him that the young wizard was not in any danger to go the way they had, loosing himself to the dark, at least not now, and if he could speak with someone about his life, then the danger would even lessen.

Mr. Lupin had said essentially the same thing. That the teenager was confused about his new position in life. That he had been adopted by the man that was responsible for his being an orphan. That so many things had been kept from him.

He had thought about it for a few days, while researching mind healing and what it was capable of.

After a few hours he was convinced that to offer some kind of help for Henry to cope was a reasonable idea, and the course of action he wanted to take. But he also was convinced that what was considered “mind healing” in wizarding Britain was not adequate.

Mostly it consisted of confining wizards and witches who were not capable of caring for themselves, or were even a danger to others, and giving them potions to keep them calm. There was not really a way to deal with the aftermath of trauma, abuse, or losses.

The methods used were extracting memories to store them in a pensieve, selective obliviation of the problematic memories, and Occlumency. Not really options he would like his son to use, even if he wanted him to learn the art of closing his mind to intrusion from the outside.

And so he had reluctantly started to research Muggle means of healing such damage. He had been surprised to find that the Muggles had come so much farther in this field.

But it was impossible to send Henry to a Muggle mind healer. He would have to speak about magic, he would need someone who understood their world.

A few weeks back he had asked his followers to find all their Squib relatives and make a list of them and their progeny.

To their luck an aunt of Quintus Goyle was a Squib and had studied to become a Muggle mind healer. She was now in her fifties, and Marvolo was waiting for Goyle to bring her here.

Chuckling, Marvolo remembered the fear in the man’s eyes as he ordered him to bring his aunt to Griffin House.

The floo flared to life, filling the cheerful room with green light, and after the flames had died down again, only the sun was illuminating the room as before.

Marvolo turned to greet his guests, his actions causing the wizard steadying his aunt to look confused and a little afraid.

“Mrs. Goyle, I presume?”

The woman nodded, eyeing the Lord in his expensive silk robes cautiously. “And you are Lord Slytherin?”

Marvolo inclined his head and called for the house elf. “Flimm! Take Mr. Goyle to the conservatory and get him something to drink.”

The small elf nodded and gestured for the other wizard to follow him. With a worried look to his Lord, the square of a wizard left his aunt alone with him.
“Please let us move to the study, Mrs. Goyle.”

He preceded the woman through the halls, working on his expression as the law-abiding Lord Slytherin, hiding the Dark Lord. He was doing this as the father of Henry, he had to act as such.

They settled into a small seating area off to the side of the study, and Marvolo offered tea and biscuits.

As they had settled down, he felt the curious gaze of the Squib on his face. It was a completely alien setting for him. It had been decades since he last had interacted in a peaceful manner with someone that was not magical.

Taking a deep breath, he started to talk. “Has your nephew told you why I asked for your presence?”

She snorted. “Ordered is more like it. And yes, he told me.”

Annoyance and amusement shot through Marvolo, and he wondered briefly over the combination before deciding to go with amusement, as it was harder to come by. He gave the silver-blond-haired mind healer an expectant look, waiting for her to tell him what Goyle had told her.

“He said that you are searching for someone to help your son adjust,” she added with an eye-roll, taking another sip from her tea.

“That is correct, but not all of it. Before I tell you more, I ask you to sign this magical contract.” He let a piece of parchment float over from the desk and handed it to Mrs. Goyle. “It is only to make sure that nothing you learn here will find its way into the press.”

Raising an eyebrow, but nodding, the woman, built like most of the family although she looked the part of the medical professional with her tailored clothes, took the quill he presented to her and added her signature swiftly, after she had read the short contract.

Marvolo added his own signature, and the contract flashed a bright golden before returning to its unremarkable appearance.

“As now you are sure that I will not tattle to the press, what is the problem you think I can help with?”

Collecting his thoughts, Marvolo launched into a longer explanation, closely watched by the healer sitting in the other chair. “As you probably know, I adopted the Boy-Who-Lived. That alone is reason to search for aid from someone who was specialized in healing the mind.” He took a sip from his tea, looking to the window with the curtains billowing in the light breeze.

“Through the medical examination I had him take, it was uncovered that he has been abused by his former caretakers.” That got the attention of the mind healer.

“I do not know to what extent, but starvation and broken bones were regular occurrences. I am pretty sure that the abuse was not sexual, but other than this I have not tried to get more information from him.”

“That is wise, given your history.”

Marvolo nodded, accepting her assessment, she was the expert after all. He had learned how to manipulate others, he knew his way around a mind to get information he wanted, but to help some? That was not his forte.
“Furthermore, he likely feels betrayed, because the adults in his life, and especially Albus Dumbledore, have never told him about his seat in the Wizengamot, or let him learn what he needs to know. I have given him all such information available to me, but that does not change the fact that he has been kept in the dark for quite some time.”

“And you want me to help him cope with the abuse and the betrayal?” she asked, refilling her cup with tea.

Marvolo nodded. “Among other things. There is a prophecy claiming that one of us will kill the other. I made an unbreakable vow to assure him that I will not kill him, but I guess he is still stressed over this.”

Marvolo closed his eyes and rubbed them with the fingers of his right hand. He was tired, it was hard feeling all the time. He remembered now why he had embraced the loss of feeling and emotions. It was nice to feel the triumph and amusement, but the worry over making a faulty decision... he could do without that.

“Will you take on my son as your patient? Mind healing in the wizarding world is not suited to help him, but a muggle, what is the term, psychotherapist?” She nodded. “...will not do, because his problems are too closely entwined with our world, his fame, my past deeds, his experiences.

“You combine the best of both worlds. Knowledge about magic and the history, the customs of our world, and the methods the Muggles have come up with to treat damage to the mind.” Marvolo had spoken with quiet intensity, trying to impress on the Squib before him that he valued her skills. If someone had told his younger self he once would ask for help from a Squib because she knew things he did not, he would have laughed disbelievingly. How the world had changed.

“I assume that you have another contract with more restrictive clauses for me to sign?”

Marvolo nodded, admiring her calm and collected demeanour, restraining himself from entering the woman’s mind to see if it was a mask or if she really was sitting calmly across from the man she knew to be a dangerous, dark wizard.

“I would like to read it and think for a few days about whether I can help your son, or not.” She observed the dark wizard for a few heartbeats before she decided to ask another question. “Why come to me? There are several muggle-born mind healers combining muggle and wizarding methods for mind healing with great success. Why ask a Squib?”

Knowing that in time he would have to reveal his political agenda regarding those born to magical parents that could not access magic on their own, Marvolo decided to answer honestly. Using the opportunity to gauge the reaction he would get with his plans.

“For one thing, I want to prove and show that Squibs can lead meaningful lives staying in the magical world. Secondly, you grew up with our traditions that are unknown to those that are stranded in the Muggle world and only come back home after many of their beliefs are already laid down.” His pleasant smile turned predatory, and his eyes flashed red through the glamour he had placed on them. “And lastly, your nephew belongs to me, it gives me another measure of control over this whole situation.”

A small frown crossed the healer’s face. “I will think about helping your son. And you should think about searching for help yourself, Lord Slytherin.”

That got him to chuckle mirthlessly. “Maybe I could have used help when I first came to Hogwarts, now is much too late, I fear.”
Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Changing Perception

Chapter Notes

Before I wrote this I had spent a week in hospital. So it was shorter than planned. Comments helped me stay sane! If you have a moment leave a comment on a story you are reading, it helps!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was running through the alleys of Little Whinging. Jumping over a low fence, Harry ran, trying to get more distance between him and the bullies hunting him. Calling taunts and banging sticks against the walls they ran along.

The streets were empty, the light low, darkness around them.

In the next moment Harry stumbled over the uneven ground of a graveyard. To both sides of his path there stood people wrapped in black robes wearing silver masks, watching and standing impassively, not aiding him, not hindering him.

The teenager was breathing fast, looking wildly from side to side. This was wrong. It was not what had happened. He needed to get back to safety. But where was safety? He did not know.

Suddenly Uncle Vernon was standing in the starlight, a nasty smile on his face. And Dudley and his friends were standing behind Harry, snickering evilly. The young wizard was surrounded.

“Freak!” Vernon spat. “Did you think you can escape us?” They all advanced on Harry and he spun around his axis, scrambling for his wand and not finding it. And then he had to curl and duck under the fists of the muggles that had always harmed him. The ones he had thought would never harm him again.

Blows were raining down on him and he cried out, beaten by muggles while the Death Eaters looked on, doing nothing.

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With a start Marvolo woke, the weight of Nagini on his legs and desperate pleas in his ears. Pleas that came from the room Henry was sleeping in.

.:The little one is dreaming bad:. Nagini said with obvious concern, slithering to the ground and towards the door.

Marvolo nodded. He had not noticed his son having nightmares regularly. But it was not too surprising he was having them. With everything the boy had had to endure in the past, it was to be expected. Shaking his head to wake up properly, Marvolo slid out from under his blanket and walked over to the door on bare feet.
As he opened the door of his room he heard Henry screaming and hastened across the hall to open the door to his son’s room, closely followed by Nagini.

The light fell on the bed where Henry lay tangled in the blanket, writhing with his face contorted, mumbling and screaming from time to time. Whatever he was dreaming, it was not pleasant.

Not sure what he could do – how would Henry react to being woken from a nightmare by one probably filling a starring role in at least some of them? – Marvolo started to murmur reassuring words, trying to communicate to his adopted son, that he was safe here and that he would not come to harm, that he should wake up, that everything was all right.

Nagini slithered up on the bed, keeping away from the flailing arms of the teenager, starting to hiss more reassuring things, clearly copying her Master’s attempts to calm the dreaming boy down.

After Henry went still, he woke with a start and scrambled away from the two beings perching on the edge of the bed until he collided with the headboard of the large four-poster bed.

:All is well, little one:. Nagini hissed in her most reassuring tone of voice.

Clearly bewildered, Henry looked around in the dark room, lit only by the candles burning in the holders mounted on the walls of the hall.

“You were having a nightmare.” Stating the obvious might seem unnecessary, but to a clearly not-fully-awake wizard it might prove helpful.

Marvolo felt a little out of his depth, comforting a distraught teenager was not something he had experience in. But by adopting a teenager he'd had to accept that there were things he would have to do that he never had had to do before. He even had asked those of his followers who had children for advice and was happier by the day that he had done so.

Henry nodded. “You were there. Two times.” The raven-haired teen looked up to him, clearly bewildered. “One of you agreed with my uncle. The other…” The teen trailed off, and Marvolo did not try to get a more coherent explanation.

“Do you have nightmares often?” he asked instead.

Henry nodded and Marvolo frowned. Why had he not known of this? The boy’s nightmares obviously were quite violent. They had had rooms next to each other in Benjamin’s manor. So why had he not heard one of the dreams before?

It only took him a moment to remember that Juliet once had told him over a meal at their house, how she'd had the elves cast silencing charms over all the guest rooms. They had probably never stopped that. As Benjamin had altered nothing else his beloved wife had initiated, Marvolo did not think that his follower had changed that. So there was his explanation as to why he had not heard his son’s bad dreams before.

“Occlumency can help with this in time. But for the moment I can get you a vial of Dreamless Sleep,” the red-eyed wizard offered.

“Yes, please,” came the quiet answer as Henry settled down again, a little more to the centre of the bed.

Casting a summoning charm for a vial of Dreamless Sleep, Marvolo contemplated the talk he had had with the muggle-educated mind healer the evening before. He had not heard from her since then, but it might be wise to broach the topic with Henry.
“There is another thing we might attempt to help you cope, Henry.”

The boy looked up and waited for Marvolo to elaborate, not saying a word himself.

“I have asked a mind healer if she thinks that she can help you to come to terms with your past. What I did, and what those Muggles have done. Healer Greengrass can help cure the damage done to your body, but these nightmares prove that there is more you need help with.”

At the moment he mentioned a mind healer, he could see the face of his son clouding and closing down. Maybe he should tell the teen what the woman had told him, it could not do any harm, probably.

“She is a Squib, and studied in the Muggle world. At the moment she is contemplating if she is willing to sign a magical contract. And she proposed that I should search for this kind of help myself.” A wry smile stole across his face as he remembered the astute woman. He shook his head. “It is much too late for me. Or at least I think it is. But you are young enough to learn a different way to cope with the anger. It might help you to learn Occlumency, I would like you to at least meet her once.”

“She would be someone I can speak with about everything? Without her being in danger?” Henry asked sceptically.

Nodding and catching the vial flying through the still-open door, Marvolo answered, “The contract would make sure that she cannot speak about the things you tell her to anyone. So I would not get to know what you do not want me to know, and no one would learn of the things I do not want known, either. She knows enough about wizards and magic so that she can help you and understand, but she has learned from the muggles, so she has better ways to go about mind healing.”

Henry accepted the vial of pale purple potion, spinning it between his fingers. “You think the Muggles are better in healing the mind?” Scepticism clear as day in the teen's voice made Marvolo snort.

“It sounds unlikely coming from me, does it not? But sadly. it is true. Healing the mind is a neglected branch of magic. Extracting memories or obliterating them is about the extent that is used. I think most just do not acknowledge the damage the mind can take, and how much it takes to be obvious even if the effects already are damaging.”

And with a start he realized it was true. Magicals just did not accept that the mind was so fragile, and mostly ignored all damage done to it. That might be a field he should push into the public eye. Maybe he could use his past to get the needed interest? But that might clash with the story of the curse he had spun for the Minister. But there was no rush, after all, this was something that had no immediate implications.

Henry nodded slowly, conceding the point made by the man known as a Dark Lord to his followers. The teen opened the vial and took its contents with one big gulp. “I will meet with her and see if I can talk with her. I think it might help to talk to someone.” He yawned and laid down, letting Marvolo tuck the blanket around him.

“Tomorrow we will go to Nott House for an adoption ritual,” Marvolo told his son, getting up from the bed and straightening the blanket. “A muggle-born wizard will become part of the family. His parents were even worse guardians than your aunt and uncle.” It was only a short explanation of his plans for the next day, but better to tell the young wizard now and get him accustomed to the idea than waiting till the morning. After the nightmare, Henry might accept the need to get a
wizard into a magical family more easily.

But maybe the teen had not registered what he had been told, after all, the potion was quick acting, and the green-eyed boy was mostly asleep already.

..Do you want to stay here? Or do you want to come with me?:. Marvolo asked his familiar with low hisses.

..I will keep the young one company:. the snake decided and curled into a tight heap next to the boy’s feet on the thin summer blanket.

Knowing that it was futile to argue with his companion, Marvolo nodded and walked back to his own bed, closing the doors on his way. If some of his followers could have heard this talk, he likely would have to get rid of them. But it simply was the truth. That Occlumency was such an obscure branch of magic was testament enough that wizards and witches greatly underestimated the mind and its health.

With a sigh and a last sip from a cool glass of water – cooling charms were rather a necessity this summer – Marvolo settled down again to sleep a few more hours.

The next morning, Saturday, Harry was mortified to remember the night and his nightmare. It was not his first one since he had been adopted, but it was the first one that had been witnessed by anyone. After the first night at Nott House, Harry had asked Theodore about the guest rooms and had learned, to his immense relief, that there were silencing charms on the rooms.

It seemed that there were no such charms on the rooms at Griffin House.

His dream had been unusual, with its combination of the Dursleys and Death Eaters, as well as two Voldemorts. Never had he had a dream with wizards and Muggles hunting him at the same time. Well, that was not quite right. They were not both hunting him at the same time. One of the Voldemorts, the one looking like the man did now, had tried to get Harry to come to him, promising help. The other, looking like the monster that had climbed out of the cauldron at the end of the tournament, had only been standing there nodding to everything Vernon had said.

And his uncle had been his usual charming self, calling his nephew a freak, a waste of space, and a burden. Seeing one Voldemort nodding in agreement with a Muggle and another claiming the opposite had been disturbing. Waking to find the man sitting on his bed murmuring soothing words had been even more discomfiting.

Thinking back to all the times he had awakened from nightmares in the last years at the Dursleys' house and their reaction, and comparing their screeching and sneering to the slightly lost look on the face of the wizard most would claim to be the most dangerous and evil man currently alive, a sharp pain shot through him. He needed to remind himself of all the times Ron and his other dorm mates had tried to console him after a nightmare, so he would not feel too bad about the fact that a Dark Lord had more compassion than his mother’s sister and her husband.

Walking back down from the owlery in the attic where he had sent a letter to Hermione, Harry started to prepare mentally for the plans for this day. He would wait for Hermione’s reply to the
suggestion of seeing a mind healer before he decided if he would give this idea serious consideration. And he would concentrate on the oddity of seeing Voldemort in his nightshirt and with bare feet to forget about the nightmare.

For now, he had to slip into the Potter robes to represent his family during the adoption ritual he would be attending this day. It seemed that it would take the whole day.

He remembered what Voldemort had told him over breakfast, in one of the impromptu lessons they would have about various aspects of magic, society, and politics. He had told him that the young boy named Aiden had been living on the streets of London, because he could not stand living with his parents. And that he would be adopted by Benjamin Nott, so that he could grow up knowing about magic.

Harry had problems with not agreeing with this sentiment. He was sure that he would have been much happier growing up with any magical family. And he meant any magical family. Even if he would not have been able to escape his fame, almost anything would have been better than being hated for something he could not change.

Harry took a deep breath. It was obvious that Voldemort wanted to change the wizarding world. It was equally obvious that he was going about this somewhat differently than the last time. Harry was not about to just help the man, but if he attempted something Harry would do on his own if he was able, where was the point in not helping? Would it not simply be petty to oppose him just because he was who he was? Even if the thing he was doing was something Harry approved of? In a way this sounded right, but Harry did not truly feel good with this course of action.

He resolved to speak with Sirius and Hermione about this. He was certain they would be able to help him untangle the mess that were his thoughts.

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Theodore was out in the garden with Aiden and the other children who had come for the adoption ritual they would be having today.

He was happy observing the young blond boy who was laughing happily at something Daphne’s younger sister had said. It was an incredible change his soon-to-be younger brother had gone through since Father had brought him to Nott House a few days back. He had been timid and a little nervous at first. But the next day he started to be curious, asking questions about everything he saw, playing with gobstones and wizarding chess, little dragon miniatures that shot sparks out of their muzzles, and a deck of Exploding Snap cards.

“Look who’s there,” Draco said from his side, pointing at the door to the house where Henry emerged, wearing robes in Potter family colours, looking around.

Just in that moment Henry spotted his Ancient Runes study partner and came over, an easy smile on his face.

“Keep your temper, Draco,” Theodore whispered to his blond friend, remembering the unhappy ending of his birthday party.

“Hello, Theodore,” Henry greeted happily, only giving a slight nod in Draco’s direction. “Heir Malfoy.”
Draco stiffened at this, but could only reply with a nod of his own and a murmured, “Heir Slytherin.” As it was perfectly polite, even if the insult was heavily implied.

“I was sent to collect you,” Henry addressed Theodore. “We both shall help laying out the circle for the adoption ritual.”

Agreeing easily, Theodore cast a last look out for Aiden, still talking with Astoria, before he nodded to Draco and followed Henry into the house.

“You still do not like him, do you?” It was almost Gryffindor brash to ask so directly, but Theodore wanted to know where he was standing, and his careful probing had not got him anywhere.

“He does not give me any reason to like him. So why should I?”

There was not much to be said to that, so Theodore stayed silent on their short trek down to the kitchen.

The Ritual was to be held at the heart of the house, and the fire in the kitchen hearth was considered to be the centre of a family's home. So this was where they found the Dark Lord and Theodore's father, as well as most of the other adults that would be taking part in the ritual.

Waiting respectfully to the side until they were invited to step closer, both teenagers were listening in.

“Thank you for offering to lay the circle for this, Marvolo,” Lord Nott said to the man in Slytherin green robes standing across from him, sorting through the contents of a silk bag.

“Have you had your Aiden tested by the goblins to see if is a descendant of a magical family?”

Theodore felt Henry tensing beside him and wondered why the other would react to this question. Maybe because it was a sore point with the other teen, that he had been left with Muggles? Letting the question go – he was not likely ever to get an answer to it, after all – Theodore instead concentrated on his father’s answer.

“Yes, we went there yesterday. He is related to the German family of Hauser, three generations back. Like your Henry and young Miss Granger, from a Squib line. I wonder if this is always the case.”

“It is quite possible that it is. We will have to keep testing to get to the roots of this.” Turning to the teenagers standing beside him, the Dark Lord smiled and hissed something to Henry, or at least Theodore assumed the hissing he heard was actually something spoken, prompting Henry to take some of the items from the table where the Dark Lord had arranged them.

“Let us start. Theodore, help Henry to paint an accurate circle in front of the hearth, please.”

Harry looked around the relatively big kitchen of Nott House. It was filled with several adult witches and wizards, as well as some small children and teenagers.

Theodore and he, together with Voldemort, had just finished setting up the ritual circle. It was a
nice work of runes drawn on the stone floor of the kitchen, drawn with chalk, sand, and, in two places, flower petals. Harry was still amused about that one.

The other thing that had the teenager curious was the group of people assembled here. He had not been surprised to see many Death Eaters here, or at least they were some of the same people who had been named during the event of the graveyard. And they had brought their wives and children. Draco was there, obviously trying to be polite, as were his mother and father. He had been surprised when Madame Longbottom, Neville’s grandmother had come into the kitchen, accepting a cup of tea from one of the elves and sitting down in one of the chairs standing to the side.

Harry was sure that she was in no way associated with Death Eaters and therefore not friends with Lord Nott. But she was there anyway, and as now, while they were stashing away the tools they had used to prepare the ritual, Madame Marchbanks, another decidedly-not-dark member of the Wizengamot, came into the kitchen, closely followed by Cornelius Fudge, Harry was sure that there was something more going on.

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The teenager turned to the man that had adopted him and was now cleaning his hands in fresh water at one of the sinks. :Why did you not do such a ritual, when you adopted me, sir?:. It was maybe a roundabout way to ask this question, but most of the time it was easier to get the answers he wanted to have, when he didn't outright ask for what he thought he wanted to know.

.:This ritual was designed to accept a witch or wizard into the Family Magic. It fell out of use somewhere around two hundred years in the past. The very fact that we are both speaking Parseltongue now proves that we were already family where magic is concerned. We only needed the paperwork done:. As Harry had come to expect, the man was patient and friendly when explaining something, and everyone hearing them hissing to each other flinched. The teen was pretty sure that some of the explanations he had been given during the preparations were only given in Parseltongue to make all present aware that they both were the last known Slytherins. Harry was not sure what he thought about that.

.:Why did it fall out of use? I guess it is not deemed illegal?:. Harry glanced to the present Wizengamot members and the Minister as he asked this. And got his assumption confirmed with a quiet chuckle.

.:Even if it could be considered blood magic, it never was considered dark. It never works against the will of those concerned, and as you can see in the runes, only protection and belonging together are invoked. And I think theories about purity of blood let the ritual fall out of use:. Letting his gaze wander over the circle of runes they had inscribed on the floor, Harry nodded. There were many runes for family, parents and children, sister and brother, clan, and quite a few for home, house, fire, and hearth in the circle. The most notable thing about the layout were the small circles with familiar crests in them, surrounding the centre. Harry was not familiar with all of them, but he recognized the crests of Slytherin, Potter, Black, and Malfoy. With a small frown on his brow, he turned from his contemplation of the circle back to the smiling Lord Slytherin standing beside him.

.:The magical community is giving their blessing that a child is accepted into a family that is not their own?:.

Voldemort only nodded and was prevented from explaining further as Professor Snape came into the kitchen, led by Lord Nott. He got a relatively large bottle out of his robes, setting it onto a table
beside an intricately decorated goblet.

“It seems that now all are gathered to welcome Aiden into the Nott family,” Voldemort proclaimed, getting the attention of everyone present, silencing the conversations being held around the room.

The man stepped into the circle and smiled, open and friendly to all present. Harry had to admire the man’s acting skills. If he had not known that this man was capable of murder, he would never have guessed it.

“As my old friend Benjamin has asked me to conduct this old ceremony to welcome a child into the family, I shall briefly explain what all of you will have to do.”

Lord Nott smiled happily and had his hands on the shoulders of a small boy, who looked around curiously and smiled at Theodore coming to stand beside them. Harry watched the little family. The small boy looked happy, he was dressed in fine robes, his short hair styled and the brown eyes sparkling. Harry was reasonably sure that Lord Nott and Theodore would be good to him, it was funny how fast the prejudices against magicals born to Muggles seemed to be changing. It was probably not as easy as it looked now, Harry was sure that no one would dare to go against Voldemort who was one of his Death Eaters, but the reactions to Hermione’s ancestry and the adoption of the boy Aiden today, made it seem easy.

“The family, that is you, Benjamin, and the two boys, will stand in the middle. The representatives of the old families will be standing in the circles marked with their family crest.” Waving his arms to direct the people to their respective places, Harry came to stand on the Potter crest and watched as the others found their places.

“Severus,” Voldemort called to the surprised Potions Master, “You will stand for the Prince family. Come over here.”

The green-eyed teen watched with interest as the normally so pale man blushed and walked stiffly over to a circle drawn between the ones of Longbottom and Fudge, taking the place he was ordered to. Maybe Prince had been the name of the man’s mother?

Soon the three Notts, Benjamin as the father, Theodore as the older brother and Aiden as the youngest son, were surrounded by seven witches and wizards standing for the Families of Slytherin, Potter, Malfoy, Black – represented by Narcissa Malfoy who had been born a Black, they had asked Sirius Black, but the man was not feeling well enough – Fudge, Prince – represented by Severus Snape – and Longbottom. Around that circle, and outside of the circle drawn from runes, stood the others in two concentric rings. The children were in the middle, and the rest of the adults stood as the final, outer ring. They barely fit into the kitchen.

The witches in the outermost ring each took up a candle and, directed by the smiling Lord Slytherin, lit them while stating a wish for the family about to grow. Going around the circle counter-clockwise, which would have a stabilizing and charging effect if they were stirring a potion – Harry hoped he would remember later so he could ask if this was also correct here– the witches wished for health, harmony, and wealth, and other things in line with these often-made wishes, until eleven candles were burning.

After that the potion Snape had brought was poured into the goblet, held by Theodore while Lord Nott got a small silver dagger from his robes. Both Notts, father and son, made a small cut into a finger and let a drop of blood fall into the potion. Then a drop of Aiden’s blood was added, and the
next part of the ritual was started.

Prompted by Voldemort with a pointed look, Lord Nott started to speak the words he had practiced over the last several days.

“By my own free will I ask the magic of our Family to accept the child Aiden as one of us. He shall be considered a son of the House of Nott, with all that entails. As the Head of the House, this is my wish.” After that he lifted the goblet to his mouth and took a sip, then handed it over to Theodore in a fluid motion.

The teen took the goblet in both hands, looked smiling over to Aiden, and spoke softly his part of the ceremony. “By my own free will I ask the magic of our Family to accept the child Aiden as one of us. He shall be considered a son of the House of Nott, with all that entails. As the heir to the House, this is my wish.” Then he too took a sip of the potion mixed with their blood and handed the goblet to Aiden, who smiled nervously.

The young wizard looked between the man that was to be his father and the teen that would be his older brother and took strength from their encouraging smiles. Taking a deep breath he started, a little wobbly, with his part of the ceremony, gaining confidence as he spoke. “By my own free will I ask to be accepted into the Family of Nott, to be son and brother, to learn, be protected, and protect.” He took a small sip from the potion, making a grimace at the taste, and held the goblet so that Benjamin and Theodore could touch it too.

Harry felt magic building around them, it was like a buzz in the air, a little like static electricity and different from the magic he had felt as he had been adopted and Voldemort had claimed the title of Lord Slytherin.

Going by age, the seven standing for the Families of the community spoke their words as witnesses, stating that they saw the earnest desire of the family to have Aiden as a part of the Family, and Aiden’s sincerity in wishing to be part of the Family. They all choose slightly different words, as Lord Slytherin had told them that the intent was the important part, not their exact words.

Then all present spoke the closing words, “So mote it be!” And with a bright flash of warm light the circles lit up and vanished, bathing them all in a feeling of community and acceptance.

Shivering a little under the magic, rubbing the goosebumps on his arms, Harry looked around and only stepped out of his place after he got a small nod from Voldemort.

The assembly quickly dispersed into a normal party, with the adults getting wine and little pastries and the children being ushered into the garden to cool butterbeer and ice cream, as well as a small gobstones tournament.

Harry was glad that Aiden and Theodore were in the centre of attention, and he was able to blend a little into the background. Tomorrow that would be different, as they were invited to the big Malfoy summer party, and Voldemort already had warned him that he was expected at least partially to take part in the political manoeuvring that was sure to happen.

But that was tomorrow. Today he could see what playing gobstones was like, as he never had tried before.

Chapter End Notes
Confusion and Deceit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Settling back behind his desk, Sirius huffed a sigh and rubbed his brow. Getting the estates back into some semblance of order was hard work. And most of it was shuffling paper around, not his favourite kind of pastime.

But if he wanted to get influence, which he needed to even try to get involved in any way in Harry’s life, he needed to repair the reputation of the Ancient and Noble House of Black. And getting the finances in order was the first step he needed to take.

Visiting the party tomorrow was the second step. Not going to this adoption ritual today was one thing he could get away with, but after that he would have to go to the events held by the families of society.

He sighed again. It seemed as if it was his fate to become everything he had wished to avoid. Oh, the irony of it all.

He raised his gaze from the contract that was on the desk in front of him and let it roam over the room. Everything was covered with the dust of ten years. Spider-webs were spanning the distance from the wall to the shelves, from the ceiling to the candelabra. And the other rooms were in no better shape. Everything that was from some kind of fabric needed to be replaced, some of the furniture had bugs in it, and not only the magical type.

It was obvious that Kreacher was simply no longer capable of caring for the house properly. He would need to find another elf.

Molly came over some days of the week, but since he had thrown the Order out of his house, and Hermione and the Weasleys had returned home, she came more infrequently. And why should he blame her? The Weasley family still held to Dumbledore, and as Grimmauld Place was no longer the headquarters of the Order, it was no longer a priority to get the house into a habitable state again.

Sirius sighed again and stood as he heard the door to the house open and felt his friend pass the wards.

“Remus!” he greeted the werewolf as he stepped into the study. “How is my best friend today?”

With a wide grin the sandy-haired man stepped into the room, and closed the door behind himself. “As we are between moons at the moment, I’m feeling fine.” Eyeing the stacks of parchments, Remus turned his slightly mocking smile to his animagus friend. “And how does Lord Black cope with his paperwork?”

The Lord in question groaned. “Don’t remind me.” He let himself drop into the chair again and flopped his head back. “I just found this old betrothal contract father had set up for poor Regulus.” Sitting up straighter, Sirius looked his old school friend in the eyes. “And that got me thinking. Will he make something like this for Harry? It is likely, isn't it?”

Hoping for a negative response from the other man, and knowing that he would not get one, Sirius looked under his long fringe to Remus, who sat down in a chair on the other side of the desk.
“From what I have seen so far, he educates Harry like any other heir to a House with a seat on the Wizengamot. So it is likely that he will arrange a marriage for Harry.” Remus leant over the desk, his hand touching the other on one arm. “But he takes good care of him.” Regret and revulsion quickly chased over the werewolf’s face. “It's hard to admit, but I believe that Harry now lives under better conditions than he did with Petunia and her husband.”

Both men sat in silence for several moments.

Sirius had to agree with Remus, it was hard to admit that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was behaving with more decency than Petunia and Vernon Dursley. A Dark Lord more human than two Muggles? It was really too much to bear.

But it was true. Harry had always looked too thin. Compared to his parents, Lily and James, he had been too short and too thin, as if he had been ill as a child, or a picky eater. And now the last time he had meet with his godson he had looked better. Not as thin, wearing decent clothes, and rested as if he had finally gotten enough sleep, after a long time.

“There will be a line of witches, with the intention to marry me,” Sirius sighed, sadly smiling at his friend.

“And what do you want to do about that?” Remus wanted to know.

“Choose one?” Taking the old contract into his hands, Sirius read the stilted words used in those contracts that still held such importance in the world of the old families of the wizarding world. “I don't think that I can flee now, like I did when we were teenagers, Moony.”

If he wanted to exert influence in society, he would keep to the rules of the society. Even those that seemed to go against all the rules decent citizens would want to uphold.

After he got himself a new elf, he would have to check the cabinet with the blackmail material.

Severus Snape watched playing children in formal robes running through the gardens of Nott House. He had a glass of iced wine in his hand and thought about the happenings of this morning. The ritual had been a revelation. He had been a bit wary when the Dark Lord had given him the text explaining the old ritual and the potion that was needed, demanding that he brew the potion and deliver it to the ceremony.

Taking part as one of those blessing the adoption as part of the community had filled him with a sense of kinship, of belonging. It had been a powerful rush of magic. He was sure that only a few of those present had truly felt it. His Lord was one, of course, and he suspected that Potter – no, Slytherin, he had to get it into his head – had felt it to.

Dumbledore had sent him here, or thought he had done so, and was now waiting in his tower for his spy to bring him a report on the ritual.

Draining his glass, Severus placed it on a small table where it vanished – courtesy of the elves – before he turned, and saw the young heir Slytherin being covered in slime as he lost a game of gobstones against the recently adopted Aiden Nott.
The teenager gave a carefree laugh and flung some of the goo at the young boy, who ducked under the blob, turning to run, starting a merry chase around the garden.

It felt surreal, all this merriment, this carefree laughter, a summer party with smiling adults and playing children. All this because the Dark Lord had ordered one of his loyal followers to kidnap a child – even if there were adoption papers, it had been a kidnapping – and take it into his family.

Severus searched for Benjamin to take his leave and kept looking for their Lord, as he wanted to check what information the man wanted to be passed on to the Headmaster. The Potions Master found their host standing on the patio speaking with Madame Longbottom, near their Lord who was in a discussion over the agenda of the next Wizengamot session with the Minister, and waited politely until Benjamin could turn to him to receive his words of thanks.

While he waited he made eye contact with his Lord and suddenly felt the man at his mind shields. Not daring to deny him entry, Severus lowered the outer shields, presenting a mental image of the headmaster’s office and projected a feeling of purpose. He almost flinched as he felt approval projected into his mind. Quickly he projected questioning and an older image of himself giving a report to the Headmaster.

In the few heartbeats he waited for his Lord’s reply, Severus contemplated the implications of this form of communication. He never had read about something like this, of two Legilimens communicating mind to mind, using images and emotions to convey information. Was it just something no one had ever wanted to write down for others? Or was it that the level of proficiency needed was only seldom reached by two individuals in the same time and place so that it never even came to this even being possible?

Before he was able to formulate more theories, the Dark Lord projected a few scenes into his Potions Master’s mind. First a fast forward of the adoption ritual from his perspective with a clear focus on the happy smiling faces of Benjamin Nott and his now two sons. After that followed a clearly imaginary picture of Lucius and Narcissa, both with radiant smiles and Narcissa obviously pregnant. And the last was a wedding party set in some garden with Severus standing, smiling, in the place of the groom, beside him an undefined person.

Taking a steadying breath, projecting an image from himself bowing low into the Dark Lord’s mind – getting amusement back – Severus turned to Benjamin, who just had finished his discussion with Augusta, who went for a new glass of punch and some pastries, and turned to the professor.

“Severus, already on the way back to your laboratory?” teased the older Lord with a fond and happy smile. This day was one of the happiest in the last years and it was showing.

“The summer is the only time of year I can even hope to get a little research done, Benjamin,” drawled Severus, easily falling into the banter he engaged in with the more intelligent of the Dark Lord’s followers. Some of them he once had considered friends. Maybe now with the changed dynamics and goals that could be true once more? But that was something to be pondered over. Not something to be hastened.

“I thank you for giving me the opportunity to brew this interesting potion, and for inviting me to be part of the adoption of your youngest son.”

Benjamin Nott smiled, raising his brow mockingly, they both knew that the Dark Lord had ordered Severus to brew and Benjamin to invite the Potions Master. But with all the people listening in at this cheerful summer party, neither of them would even think about it too loud.
“You are the best Potions Master around, Severus Snape. And you are Head of House to my oldest. Of course I would invite you to this important event for my family. Thank you for coming, and have a nice day with your research.”

On his way around the house and to the edge of the wards Severus exchanged polite greetings with a few of the guests and finally, with a last look at the playing children, apparated away.

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Walking in the summer heat from the gates over the grounds up to the castle, Severus prepared his Occlumency shields, shuffling memories around and sorting them, so he was in the right mental state to go before the Headmaster and give his report.

Severus snorted, realising that he now acted the way he had done every time he had walked to a meeting with the Dark Lord as he had worked as Dumbledore’s spy in the past.

It was appalling how fast everything had changed.

A few minutes later Severus stepped into the Headmaster’s office and stopped in his tracks, because there were more people present than he had expected.

“Pomona, Filius, I had not expected to see you here,” the Potions Professor said as he took his seat in the last empty chair standing between those used by his colleagues.

“I thought it prudent to have all Heads here, after all, we are speaking about one of our future students,” the Headmaster said offering a small silver dish of pale yellow candies to the dark-haired wizard, and as he declined, to the other professors.

“And,” the old wizard hesitated and placed the dish with his favourite candies back on the desk, “there was a fire reported in London on Thursday that did not use any kind of accelerant known to Muggles. A man died in the fire.”

Severus looked up to the Headmaster and saw that the twinkle in his eyes was absent. Not about to give the man any hints, even if he could guess where this was going, dark eyes only threw a questioning glance at the Headmaster.

“The man was known to the police for his unhealthy interest in small boys.” All present shuddered at the thought, that there were actually humans capable of such evil. “And the Aurors are investigating the fire because they believe that it might have been caused by a wizard or witch.”

“I dare say he will not be missed,” was Severus’ casual reply, he had known it was going in this direction. Albus was fishing for information. Well, he could give him some.

Sighing for effect, Severus sat back in his chair and started his report on Aiden Nott.

“I know that the boy, Aiden, was living on the streets of London. It seems he was not happy with his parents and chose to live on the streets. He was retrieved on Thursday, and the adoption papers were signed by the boy’s biological parents on the same day.” Dark eyes met blue. “I have been asked to provide nutritional potions for the child, as well as a potion used in the Familia Adoptio Ritual.”
At the name of the ritual Filius reacted with widening eyes, interrupting Severus’ report. “Was this ritual not abandoned by the old families bent on blood purity, because it only adds a child to the familial magic and does not affect the familial connection?” He sounded and looked astonished, as if he could not believe a family like the Notts, known for caring about the purity of blood, would use a ritual with this known “problem”.

Severus nodded. “There are rituals and potions, illegal ones, that will change the parents of a child to those who add their blood to the potion, thus altering the appearance of the child, making it an actual descendant of the family adopting the child.”

Before Severus could explain more, Albus interrupted with a question of his own. “Could you have brewed the illegal potions, my boy?”

Rolling his eyes, Severus answered his employer with mockery clear in his voice. “I have encountered nothing that I could not have brewed if you gave me the recipe and the ingredients. So, yes I could have, but I was not ordered to.”

It seemed that the Headmaster did not truly value his skills, or just wanted to ask obvious questions. Better to talk about the important bits of information.

“Aiden Nott is not in any danger. When I was leaving, he had just won a game of gobstones against Mr. Potter. He was having a good time at a party given for him. The nutrient potions indicate that his previous life was not ideal. I have seen a happy child today.” Concentrating on the Headmaster, who looked like he did not approve of the happenings of the day, Severus stated in a matter-of-fact voice a theory he had held for quite some years now. “Say, Headmaster, this boy was living on the streets, because he could not bear living with his parents. Do you think he would have reached the age of eleven and come here, if Lord Nott had not taken action and adopted him? The man that died that day, you clearly believe that his death is somehow connected to Aiden’s adoption. Why would you think that? And if they had met and the death in the fire was connected to the child, do you think he was about to take the young wizard to a safe place? Headmaster?”

All other Heads of House shifted uneasily in their chairs, Pomona fidgeting with her sleeves, Filius dangling his legs above the ground, Minerva checking her bun, they all had asked the Headmaster to check how many children in the book recording the birth of magical children within the borders of Britain were crossed out. How many children had never received a letter because they had died before they had turned eleven?

They all had let the Headmaster talk them out of their desire to check. And Severus was sure they all recognized what had happened two days prior, and realized who was to be thanked for rescuing a young wizard from a gruesome fate.

The tension in the room was rising until the Headmaster nodded solemnly and smiled, his eyes twinkling once more. “You are right, Severus my boy. Aiden now has a happy home, and the Aurors are capable of finding out if there was a spell involved in the unfortunate death. We have other matters to discuss.” He turned to the Heads of House of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. “Pomona, Filius, thank you for your time. I shall not delay you further. In a few years we will meet Aiden Nott at his sorting ceremony, and then we will hopefully see a happy child coming to one of your houses.”

Filius jumped from his chair and followed Pomona out of the circular office. Only the members of the Order of the Phoenix remained in the room, and Albus banished the now no-longer-needed chairs.

“Severus, you know that to check on the book we would need to break the wards that surround it.
And to do so would endanger it and its magic, only to get a list of children we cannot save. Is it worth the risk? I know that there is a problem, but we need to find another solution.” For a long moment dark eyes were locked with twinkling blue ones, and finally Severus lowered his gaze.

They had argued about this several times. The book that recorded the births of magical children was protected from humans coming near it, to make sure that no one tried to kidnap young Magicals from their families, or kill those born to Magicals that had no magic themselves. They knew that each year muggle-born children died from different reasons, and they wished that they were able to prevent it. The Ministry did nothing to get such children out of their families, because they argued that if there was a problem, like abuse, then the Muggle Authorities were capable of handling it. And keeping closer watch to prevent magical accidents would risk the Statute of Secrecy.

Severus wanted to get the number of deaths to prove that there was a need to do more. But Albus argued that if they risked the magic of the book, they would never be able to invite those that did survive.

A vicious circle in Severus’ opinion. But maybe the Dark Lord had decided to do something about it. Recognizing this as the perfect opportunity to present the information in an unsuspicious way Severus let a faint expression of realization pass over his face. It would not do to display it too openly, or not show it at all. Albus Dumbledore was no amateur in this game, so the Dark Lord’s spy needed to give it his all.

“I guess the Dark Lord has decided to do something about the problem.”

“What do you mean, my boy?” asked the Headmaster, leaning forward in his chair steepling his fingers.

“Lucius told me a few days back, that he will not require me to brew him the contraceptive potions for the next time. And I have been ordered,” he had to struggle to tell this, not only to make the whole more believable, but simply because he liked his privacy and had to tell the old manipulative goat and Minerva something really private, “to find a partner and start a family.” Ignoring the twinkle in the Headmaster’s eyes and the gasp from the Head of Gryffindor House, Severus simply continued with his report, a scowl on his face. “Together with the adoption of a young wizard who likely would have died in the streets, I think there is a pattern emerging.”

A small, wrinkled hand appeared on Severus’ arm and Minerva squeezed it gently in silent support. Ignoring it for the moment, the Potions Master fixed his gaze on the Headmaster, who contemplated the spy’s conclusion.

For several long moments, only the hissing and whirring of the countless strange silver instruments distributed over all the shelves in the office was to be heard.

“I see what you are hinting at, my boy. But I can’t see the reason he would act this way.” The question was not stated, but obvious in the pale blue eyes.

Shaking his head slowly, Severus answered in the negative: he did not know why either. “Maybe he got his hands on a muggle book on genetics? I do not know his reasons. I can only speculate based on my observations.”

And so they started to speculate over the Dark Lord’s plans. Dumbledore started asking for the particulars of the ritual, which Severus gave in all the minute detail he was able to, so it was several hours later that Minerva and the Potions Master left the office of the Headmaster.
On their way down to Minerva's quarters to get a nightcap, the Scottish witch asked her younger colleague, “How long do you have to fulfil your orders?”

“A little under a year to find someone to marry.” There was almost no inflection to Severus’ reply.

In an obvious effort to cheer the younger wizard up, or at least distract him a little, Minerva asked with a cheeky smile. “These robes aren't black, are they?”

“They are not, Minerva, as well you know. The colour is called midnight blue. I was attending an adoption, black would hardly have been acceptable.”

Laughing heartily, Minerva gave her password to the lion painting guarding her door and let Severus go in before her.

Severus just knew that his former Transfiguration Professor would be telling amusing stories all evening to cheer him up. There were worse ways to spend an evening.


Back at Griffin House in the dining room, Marvolo ate his soup and watched his son absent mindedly rubbing at his joints. He wondered if this was a sign of magical exhaustion from participating in the ritual, or if he just had over-exerted himself running around in the gardens of Nott House. He would have to ask a few questions to get to the bottom of this mystery, but maybe he should start with something else before he began to pry.

“How did you like the day, Henry?” he inquired between two spoonfuls of soup.

Clearly contemplating, the young green-eyed wizard finished chewing his bread and took a sip of his watered red-wine – pulling a grimace, he did not enjoy wine – before he answered. “Aiden was very happy. As was Theodore. It was the first time I had a chance to play gobstones. It was a nice day.” He shrugged and tried to look unconcerned, but failed miserably – at least Marvolo thought so.

“What did you think about the adoption ritual?” Marvolo really wanted to break his son’s bad habit of thinking of all rituals as dark. Reflecting on what rituals the teen had been part of, he clearly had to stick to the adoption ritual for the moment. Maybe he should create a few occasions for more positive rituals in the future.

“It was… different. Why did no one knew what they had to do? Why hasn't it been used in so long?” The unasked question – whether it was illegal – stood unvoiced between them.

“It fell out of use as the views on purity of blood started to take a broader hold on the old families. They stopped adopting magical children found in the Muggle world into their families, and thus stopped using this ritual.” Sipping from his own wine, the red-eyed wizard examined the teen on the other side of the table. “Ask what you want to know. I can virtually read your question in the air.”

Holding back a smirk at the scalding glare Henry shot him at being made to say it out loud, Marvolo waited patiently for the teenager to voice what was on his mind.
Grinding out his question through his teeth while sending death glares at his guardian, Henry finally asked, “Was it a dark ritual?”

“No.” Marvolo smirked a little. “Not according to the categorization after the magical theory. It would be considered grey, because on the one hand it requires blood, but on the other it only works if the participants are willing.”

Henry furrowed his brow. “What do you mean after the magical theory, sir?”

“Well, the Ministry has its own categorization. It differs in large parts from the one used in magical theory. The number of dark spells and rituals considered dark under the Ministry’s definition is large. But there are only a few truly dark or light spells and rituals.”

The soup plates vanished, replaced by dinner plates, while a platter with a light meal of various vegetables and chicken appeared in the middle of the table.

Marvolo filled his plate with mostly vegetables, he had had quite a few pieces of cake over the afternoon and now was not really hungry.

Henry rubbed his fingers, as if he was in pain, before he filled his plate. He started to worry a little, why was the teen doing this? But how to ask and not set the teen off?

“What would be an example of a light spell?” the boy wanted to know, trying to steer the conversation back into less dangerous territory, calming down.

“The Patronus Charm is one of the only light spells I know of. Because it cannot be cast with malicious intent, and only serves the purpose of defending the caster, or others, against dark creatures.”

With surprise clear in his green eyes Henry asked, “And what about healing spells? Aren't they light?”

Shaking his head and swallowing his bite of carrots, Marvolo replied, “I can cast a healing spell so someone will not die before he can be tortured further. So they can be cast with ill intent, and therefore are not truly light.”

Mulling over this new information, a frown on his face, Henry was silent for the rest of the meal. But before he could excuse himself after the pudding – strawberry ice with vanilla sauce and whipped cream – Marvolo gestured for him to stay seated.

“How are you feeling?” He managed to let his voice stay neutral. Even if he felt anything but. Marvolo did try not to think about what he was feeling or why. Maybe concern about the health of his heir? It had been a big ritual, only seldom had he felt this much energy from one.

“Fine,” came the automatic reply, the teen shrugging, rubbing his arms.

Now it was Marvolo’s turn to frown. “Do I need to repeat that I do not want you to lie to me?”

There was a threat of anger in his voice and he shot the teenager a calculating look.

But Henry did not notice, he was looking at the table, kneading his hands.

“Sometime this afternoon my arms, legs, and hands started to hurt.” The head covered in unruly black hair – all attempts at taming it had been futile – snapped up and Henry started to babble. “But it is not really a problem, I’m sure tomorrow it will be gone. Really, sir, no need to make a fuss about it.”
Taking a deep breath – it would not do to snap at the teen – Marvolo shoved his anger at the Muggles who had harmed the young wizard, deep down into his mind. He had to stay calm.

“I will decide if there is need to make a fuss. I will cast a diagnostic charm at you, so we can see if there is something to worry about or not.”

Getting his wand out of its holster, Marvolo stood and waited for the teen to give his consent. No need to force the boy if he might yet say yes.

And as the teen nodded Marvolo murmured the spell, making the flowing, swirling motion of the general diagnostic charm, one of the only healing spells he actually knew. Maybe he would find some time to learn more about healing, as he had told Henry, it could prove useful to be able to heal others.

The result was inconclusive. Marvolo frowned and Henry looked apprehensive. “I think I will get your Healer here.” With raised hand he stopped the teen from speaking. “I know you do not think there is any reason to make a fuss. But do remind me, have you finished a Healer’s education?”

The teen shook his head mutely.

“Neither have I, so I will call an expert, so we can know for sure.” Indicating for Henry to stay where he was, Marvolo turned to the door and walked the short distance to his study. There he tapped the small snake ornament and walked back to the dining room. It was still and hot, and he sat down, taking another helping of the ice with a large dollop of whipped cream.

Henry got himself a new portion too, and they waited.

They did not have to wait long before Flimm brought Healer Greengrass into the room. And as all his Death Eaters would do, the young healer fell onto one knee in reverence.

“Henry has had pains in his bones since this afternoon. We did participate in a big adoption ritual this morning, and were at a garden party after that. I want you to check for the cause.”

Getting up from the floor, the healer turned to his patient and explained what he was about to do, while Marvolo looked on, eating his dessert before it could melt.

It only took a few moments and a few spells until the healer turned to address Marvolo and his adopted son.

“My Lord, heir Slytherin-Potter, there is no need for concern. These pains are rather common for growth spurts. He can take a pain potion if he needs one so he can sleep. And in a few days they should vanish. That it is setting in now is a sign that the nutrient potions are doing their work.” Malcolm Greengrass was smiling, happy to bring good news. And Marvolo was feeling rather happy as well – a somewhat novel experience, being happy about the news that another was not ill – and nodded in approval to his healer.

“It also means that we can start to think about treating those badly healed bones. Have you decided which method you would prefer yet?” the healer asked of the young Slytherin heir.

Watching his son thinking about his options, vanishing and regrowing the affected bones or breaking them anew to heal them, Marvolo was not sure which option he would have chosen. He dimly remembered having a broken arm when he had been maybe five or six, and he remembered that it had been rather unpleasant. And he knew, from theory and watching, that having bones regrown was a nasty experience.
Finally the teen, decidedly pale now, fixed his bright, green eyes on the healer. “Re-breaking and healing them on the spot is the faster way, right?” asked the teen, visibly nervous.

“It is,” nodded the younger Greengrass, “But breaking the bones again will be as painful as the first time.”

“Vanishing the bones might not be painful, but I remember an arm without bones, that was odd.” Henry shuddered. “And regrowing them was hard and took long. I rather would have it over with quickly.”

“I suggest the start of August, after your birthday, Henry,” Marvolo suggested, ignoring the healer for the moment, he never would repeat anything he would hear or see here.

Nodding in agreement, the teenager stood mute, rubbing his hands.

“Go up to your room and prepare to go to sleep. It has been a long day. I will send a potion up to you.”

Nodding again, Henry turned and gave a minute bow to the healer and then went, without further greeting, out into the hall and up to his room.

After the teen's steps had faded away, Marvolo turned to his only fully trained healer, who had resumed his kneeling position from earlier.

“Prepare everything for the second of August, if you need potions, inform Severus Snape so he may brew them. Are there any questions? Dismissed.”

The healer left and Marvolo took a last bowl of ice along to his study. If he worked fast, he might get the paperwork done today, so he would not have to bother with it tomorrow before they had to leave for the Malfoy garden party.

Getting up in the early hours of the morning, Narcissa rushed to get dressed in comfortable, light robes, while Lucius took extra care with shaving this morning.

It was Sunday the 23th of July, the day of one of the two big events they hosted every year. All the important people of wizarding Britain would be here today, and it had to be perfect.

“I will be in my study, Lucius,” she called back over her shoulder, almost out of their bedroom.

“Yes, my dear. I will meet you there,” sounded the slightly muffled voice of her husband from their bathroom.

It was a really important party today. Much more so than all of those of years prior. The Dark Lord, Lord Slytherin, would be in attendance, as well as the Minister, her newly freed cousin Lord Black, and a great number of others that were of some importance in their world.

While Narcissa went down to the study calling her elf, Flower, to her to go over the number of dishes and how they were to be arranged, she thought about the objective Lucius had for the day. Staging a new start for their relationship to the new Lord Slytherin in a way that would seem
inconspicuous to the light wizards and witches. In some way that would not set off the aurors, or Dumbledore.

Yesterday evening, after they had already extinguished the light in their bedroom, Lucius had confessed to her that he still did not know how he would go about it. He just hoped to find an opportunity at the party, or create one in a stroke of inspiration.

Turning her mind to the problem of where to place the ice-cooled drinks with and without alcohol – there were a few that had problems with judging when they had had enough – Narcissa lost herself in the planning.

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Draco was standing in his best formal robes, the crest was done in silver thread on the darker blue silk robe, lined with a pale blue silk with a pattern of feathers woven into it. He loved his new robes, but at the moment he felt rather hot in his fine woolen trousers, the long-sleeved silken shirt, and the robes over it all.

He nodded in greeting to Madame Bones as she stepped out of the floo, following the Minister. As was custom, the heir was standing beside his parents, greeting all the guests and being bored to death.

And then there was the Dark Lord in green robes with the Slytherin crest, followed by Potter in mostly grey robes with embroidery in red and green, snakes and flames respectively. Remembering the night he had witnessed the Dark Lord torturing that witch in their entrance hall and trying to not think about it, Draco gave the expected greeting.

He looked forward to the moment he could slip off and meet with his friends back at the small pond under the old trees in that out-of-the-way corner of the grounds. They had arranged to meet there in the letters they had exchanged.

Nodding to yet another pair of old people in formal robes, the blond teenager hoped that this ordeal would be over soon.

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For the moment Harry shadowed his guardian, as instructed, and they were standing in the shade of a big parasol, each holding a cooled drink.

It became apparent quickly that this was an occasion used for politics, scheming, and fencing with sharp tongues.

And so here he stood together with the Minister of Magic, the pink Undersecretary who had asked the dangerous question during Sirius’ trial, Voldemort, Lord Nott, and another of the Death Eaters Harry had seen that night in the graveyard, McNair.

They were speaking about different topics, mostly about problems with the control of magical
animals and the struggle it was to keep Muggles from noticing them.

Harry was sure that if this had been the summer of last year, he would have tried to find a way to get out of the conversation as soon as possible. But now that he knew he would have to be a politician, at least part of the time, he was paying special attention to what was happening around him.

The topic of conversation changed with the arrival of Sirius to their group. Harry smiled at his godfather and got a smile in return.

“I do not understand why you claim that our current laws regarding werewolves are insufficient,” the pink witch said in a voice sweeter than sugar. Harry felt unwell with the way she smiled at Voldemort, like she was talking to a stupid child, that was not going to end well.

But Voldemort was made of sterner stuff, and he was a consummate actor. The man smiled politely and seemed to be totally unconcerned. Sirius was rolling his eyes in Harry’s direction and politely listened to the answer given.

“All beings need certain things. Shelter, food, company. Your laws deny those witches and wizards affected by lycanthropy those basic needs. Only the most strong-willed individuals are able to stick to their morals while denied what everyone craves.”

A worried look crossed the blue eyes, a look that Harry knew to be false as well as the eyes' colour.

“This need is an easy tool to use for someone to get the alliance of most of them.” That he had exploited these weaknesses in the past went unspoken but heard by all present.

Harry briefly wondered if he would have noticed the unspoken conversation last year and guessed that he would have... if he had been able to stay calm, that is.

With a scoff, the witch, resembling a toad quite a bit in Harry’s opinion, disregarded the other’s words. “They are no more than savage animals. If not for the soft-hearted liberals, we could have solved the whole problem long ago.”

Stiffening in anticipation of an explosion of his godfather’s temper, Harry closely watched the man’s face and noted an exchange of glances between the newly appointed Lords Black and Slytherin. The former Lord Voldemort seemed to say ‘let me handle it’, while a sceptical Lord Black send a look of incredulity and something like ‘sure, try, it’s your funeral’ back.

“While I was searching for a History tutor for my son, I received several dozen applications. I only could invite ten of those to an actual interview. And only Mr. Lupin was in any way competent enough for me to hire to teach my heir about our history. So I would contest your claims.”

The smile on Voldemort’s face was poisonous, the smile on Madam Umbridge’s face was strained, and Sirius looked a little stunned.

Harry was a little bewildered. Why was Voldemort defending werewolves?

oooooo

Sirius wandered over to the buffet with the fruit cakes, as he was hungry. It was a little confusing.
That bastard of Lord Slytherin defending werewolves, making sure that Harry and Sirius got to meet as often as they did.

He wanted to be more involved with his godson, even if he had not dared to hope that he would be as involved as he was now, he wanted more. He wanted to be able to decide some things: about the money of the Potters, about where Harry was living, who was to teach him, what he would learn.

Taking a strawberry tartlet, Sirius stepped to the side so that others could get to the table and take some of the delicious-looking pastries and tartlets.

Lord Black was contemplating methods to get more involved with young Harry’s life. One way would be to make Harry his heir. It would grant him some more influence, as a Lord, or Lady, had the right to see to the way their heir was educated.

Sadly, Sirius was not sure if Harry could fill the spot, as he did not know all the requirements of the Black heir. As Harry’s grandmother had been a Black, he was at least related to the family not too far back. But Draco had a closer relationship through his mother. Furthermore, Harry was a half-blood due to his mother being born of non-magical parents, but Draco was a pureblood. He needed to go through the old family books. Maybe he could get one of the older portraits to help him get all the requirements listed. He dearly hoped that Harry was a better candidate than Draco.

Finishing the last crumbs of the tasty tartlet, Sirius turned to find some friendly faces to talk to when he spotted the widow Zabini walking over the short, green grass, looking around as if she was searching for something or someone. Fearing that it was him she was looking for – she had been known for hunting for wealthy bachelors to marry even in the days before he had been sent to Azkaban – Sirius quickly ducked behind some wizards on their way to the buffet and hurried to be somewhere else.

Maybe he could find Harry away from that bastard Slytherin and talk with him.

With a friendly smile to counteract the sour face of her husband’s friend, Narcissa motioned Miss Strout to step forward. She was a healer in the Janus Thickey Ward, and the blonde Lady hoped that Severus would not manage to run her off too quickly.

Watching the Potions Professor speak with the witch in her rather outdated robes – they surely were at least from last year – Narcissa contemplated what qualities a woman needed to be a suitable wife for the youngest Potions Master in several hundred years.

She needed to be intelligent, Severus needed someone he could converse with, debate. She needed to be able to counter his sharp sarcastic statements and his often gloomy moods. It would probably be best if she had brown, blonde, or black hair... as long as it was not red, and any colour of eyes but green.

Narcissa strongly suspected that Severus still was attached to the unobtainable witch, better to find him someone that differed as much in appearance as was possible.

But to find someone would be hard. All that were younger by a mere four years had been taught by the man at some point. So she had to stick to those he had gone to school with, or some that were older.
And she only had close ties to the pure-blooded witches, and most of those were already married by now. Or not suitable at all for one reason or the other.

And so she watched a conversation die right in front of her eyes and she planned and plotted, thinking up ways that she might be able to find a selection of witches that might be a match for Severus Tobias Snape.

Maybe she could send out a question into the circles for witches interested in marrying the last of the Prince family. The way things were developing, it might be a good idea to flaunt this, he was a half-blood, so not related to quite so many families, so with the stigma of impure blood being lessened, he became a rather interesting catch.

Yes, that might prove to be the way to go. Only one year. Too short a time, but what was she to do about it?

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As he searched for a spot a little away from all the hubbub, Harry found Neville standing beside a curious-looking flower.

“Hi, Neville, did not think you would be coming here.”

Turning, startled, Neville smiled brightly. “Harry! So good to see you. I've been hearing the weirdest stuff about you all summer. Gran told me you've been adopted by... You-Know-Who?” The round face of his fellow Gryffindor was coloured with concern. “Is it true?”

Nodding reluctantly, eliciting a startled gasp from Neville, Harry smiled sadly. “It is true. And weird. Really weird.” He rolled his eyes and chuckled.

“And you are okey?” Neville asked reluctantly.

Before Harry could answer, a few other teens came around a bush, talking animatedly.

Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott, and Daphne Greengrass and her sister Astoria, as well as Pansy and some more of the Slytherins from their year, came to stand before the two Gryffindors.

Bowing slightly, Draco Malfoy greeted the other teens. “Heir Slytherin-Potter, heir Longbottom. What a pleasure to meet you.”

Remembering the proper response Harry bowed as well, not as deeply, as his Houses were of higher standing than the House of Malfoy, and replied, “The pleasure is all mine.”

As he came back up from the bow he caught the surprised looks on the faces of all the other teens, and could not refrain from rolling his eyes.

“That I was denied the opportunity to learn what I need to know, does not mean that I am incapable of learning.” he pointed out.

“You didn't know?” Neville turned to his friend and stared incredulously at the raven-haired boy.

“I knew nothing.” Harry sighed. “What do you want?”
“Want to play a round of exploding snap?” Asked Theodore all of them and got reluctant agreement.

Together they found a place under a tree, and Malfoy junior called for an elf to bring them a blanket and a pack of cards.

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Buzzing through a flowering bush and the heavy scent of it, a shimmering green beetle searched for a group of people standing near enough to one of the plants to hear what they were talking about.

The beetle, with a complex pattern around its head and antennae, found an interesting group consisting of the Minister of Magic, the host of the party Lord Malfoy, the newly named Lord Slytherin, who was largely an unknown factor, and some minor workers and assistants standing in the shade of a linden tree. That looked promising.

Finding a low branch to sit on, the beetle made itself comfortable and listened in on the conversation.

“How have you been adjusting to being alive again, Lord Slytherin?” the Minister of Magic asked in a cheery tone, sipping from the glass of cool lemonade he held in his hand.

“Mostly well, Minister,” the young and quite attractive-looking Lord Slytherin answered. “Henry and I are adjusting to living as a family, and we have moved to one of the Potter properties, so that we no longer impose on the hospitality of Lord Nott.”

“I think it must be rather strange to come back into society after being cut off from all company for so long,” drawled Lucius Malfoy with a badly hidden sneer on his face. There seemed to be quite a bit of animosity there.

Nodding his head and looking a little forlornly at the ground, only to look back up and lock gazes with the blond Lord and host, the wizard with his bright blue eyes spoke with a deep sadness evident in his voice and posture. “It is. But stranger still is the realization that my wand killed one of the last remaining descendants of Salazar Slytherin, a member of my family.”

He looked to the side, closing his eyes for a short moment, and the beetle sat with fast flapping wings in excitement.

“Henry and I went to Gringotts to get an ancestry test done, and learned that his mother,” he gulped but forced himself to continue, “that his mother was a descendant of a squib line descending from Salazar Slytherin.”

This revelation clearly shocked the Minister and made Lord Malfoy think, if his furrowed brow was anything to go by. This was good, more than good. So as not to miss anything the beetle shifted its place a little closer to the end of the branch, a little closer to the wizards standing beneath the tree.

“And even knowing that I was not strong enough to fight the curse that made me do all those horrible things, I still feel somewhat responsible for the things that happened.”
Here the wizard in Slytherin green robes, with his brown hair carefully styled, turned to the host of this party. “I remember that the Imperius curse was placed on you, Lord Malfoy. And I know that there is nothing that can reverse what happened. But I hope that we will be able to start over again.”

With a thoughtful gaze, Lucius Malfoy played with the glass he held in his hands, nodding slowly, inclining his head, he conceded, “I think that a civil working relationship between the houses of Malfoy and Slytherin is possible.”

With a bright smile and a jovial mien, the Minister looked between the two Lords. “You see, Lord Slytherin, it all turns out well in the end. I can help you to make amends to those that … had problems with you. Arrange meetings. And with young Harry, you are on the right way as well. I’m sure of it.”

The small wizard reached as high up Lord Slytherin’s shoulder as he could and clapped awkwardly in what probably should be a reassuring gesture.

He got a small sigh and a sad smile for his efforts. “You are right of course, Minister. Henry has given me purpose again. Ordering the estates for him, giving him the education he will need. He is the light of my life. And I hope that I will be able to rebuild the Slytherin fortune, so his children can continue both families in the future.”

One very smug beetle launched itself from the light green leaf into the fragrant summer air in search of another group to listen to. This party would fill the papers for weeks. Of that it was sure.

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Shuddering inside, Marvolo watched the Minister walking over to another group of wizards, standing a little nearer to the pond. The Minister was much too self-important to even recognize when he was being used. And the lower clerks always following in the man’s wake would spread the horrid sob-story he had performed all over the Ministry. It would not take long, and hopefully would defuse some of the more sinister rumours starting to creep along the grapevine.

Maybe he should organise some outings for Henry and some of his classmates, maybe he could arrange for Xerxes’ grandniece to be included, so the public would get to see him in a context of happy family life.

Parting ways from his follower, searching for some others he should speak to, Marvolo made his way around a group of chatting witches – they seemed to be discussing the pregnancy of one of them – towards the manor.

Maybe one of the blueberry muffins could help with getting rid of the foul after-taste of his performance.

ooooo

A group of several witches and wizards had gathered around a bench and nibbled on pastries,
sipped on drinks. They looked on as Lord Slytherin parted ways with the Minister and his entourage, walking over to another group and striking up a conversation.

“Do you believe his story about that curse?” Amelia Bones asked no one in particular, distractedly watching a group of small children running by.

“Not one moment,” snorted the new Chief Warlock. “I am sure that the story about some curse that affected him is fabricated. But it is undoubtedly true that he is saner now.”

They all nodded their heads. It was obvious that the man different from what they remembered of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. But what exactly was different, none of them was really sure.

“If I did not know who he used to be…” Augusta Longbottom shook her head, making her hat with a big flower arrangement wobble dangerously “… I would never suspect the way he is acting now.”

Dodge nodded solemnly. “Whatever he did to get back, I think he will be much more dangerous now.”

“I wonder why the Prophet is surprisingly quiet about the whole affair. It is something that Skeeter woman normally would love to write about.” Amelia drained her glass and set it down on the bench beside Lord Abbott.

“They probably don’t want to admit that they were wrong in claiming that Potter had lost all his marbles. Give them a few more weeks and they will be all over this story. By then most will have forgotten what a smear campaign they were driving against the poor boy.” Abbott heaved a sigh and leaned back in the bench.

“We all allowed ourselves to be too easily surprised,” growled Augusta. “Why was it no one of us knew what was going to happen?”

“He always was a master of deceit, if we are to believe what Albus tells me. I would guess that he planned that very carefully, and only involved those he can trust,” Elphias Dodge offered as an explanation.

“It does appear, though, that Malfoy really was under the Imperius,” mused Abbott.

Amelia snorted. “I doubt it, but he is a hell of an actor.”

“We need to keep close watch on what Lord Slytherin is doing,” Augusta practically demanded, a purple flower on her hat quivering with her fury.

“I will make absolutely sure that he respects the traditions and rules of the proceedings in the Wizengamot,” Chief Warlock Abbott promised.

“And I will keep an eye out for any law breaking.” Amelia said, sighing. “I wish I could use his old crimes to get a warrant to search his house and put an auror on him. Can you do something about that law he used?”

Looking back at the day, Harry downed his pain potion so he could sleep despite the pain in his
arms and legs. He only was wearing shorts and a t-shirt to bed.

It had been a weird day. Seeing all those he knew to be Death Eaters and Voldemort himself, mingling with all those other wizards and witches, those that proclaimed themselves to be Light, had been a bewildering experience. And the card game with the Slytherins had been weird too. He never would have guessed that he could be civil with them. Or better yet, that they could be civil to him.

How would they react when they learned that his mother had magical ancestors, that Hermione was related to the Lestranges? The magical world was about to change, and his world with it. He still was not sure what he should think about that.

Slipping between the thin silken sheets on his bed – it was too warm for anything else – Harry looked out of the slightly opened window to the stars and waxing moon. How he wished that he could speak with his parents. Ask them for advice. Ask them what he should do.

Could Sirius answer his questions? He was not sure if the man could really leave his bias out of it, though. From his parents Harry would expect that they would want the best for him, whatever that would entail. But Sirius had a tendency to not see very far, or at least it had seemed that way, that night in the Shrieking Shack and later in the hospital wing after the third task.

Why did his life have to be so complicated?

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Pacing in a semicircle in his office, ignored by Fawkes, who groomed his magnificent tail feathers, Dumbledore grumbled into his beard, agitated. How did it happen that everything was going this wrong?

He had declined the invitation to the big summer event the Malfoys hosted every year in the gardens surrounding Malfoy Manor. He had thought that meeting Harry would be counterproductive. But he never would have guessed what other things would come out of this event.

Turning sharply, his robes brushing the shelves, the aged wizard marched in the other direction, throwing a furious glare at the Prophet from this morning laying on his desk, among all the other mail he had gotten.

Rita Skeeter had always been a little liberal in interpreting the facts to get a big audience to read her stories. And Albus suspected that the big opening article on the front page of this morning’s edition was as firmly based on fact as all other articles the reporter had ever written.

It was a ridiculous story. A mix from the rumours started the day they had to declare Tom Marvolo Riddle alive again, exonerating him of all the crimes he had committed, and some bits of a conversation she had probably been spying on.

But the worst bit was, the public loved Rita Skeeter and her sensational articles. They practically were eating out of her hand, believing everything she wrote. They had believed the drivel she had written about Harry during the Triwizard Tournament. They would believe what she was writing now about the young Lord Slytherin.

She had asked the question if Lord Slytherin was a villain or a tragic scholar. It was laughable. But it made him realize that he would not be able to work in the open. No, he could not be seen as working against Lord Slytherin. He was the champion of the Light, the man that granted second chances. And he was running out of time.

He needed to start now. He had hoped that he could get more information before he had to start. But it seemed that he would have to begin collecting now. He already knew where the Gaunts had lived, and suspected that the ring Tom had suddenly stopped wearing was one of his horcruxes. Probably the second one the boy had created, if he was to assume that the diary had been the first one.

He wished he could concentrate on collecting memories, the people that knew anything of value about Tom Marvolo Riddle and what he had been up to after school had started dying off, if they were not already dead.

Throwing himself into his chair behind the desk, Albus started to rifflle through his mail. He had come to a decision. He would start searching for the horcruxes, he had to abandon his plan as it was highly improbable that he would get Harry to cooperate. He sighed. The boy had grown on him, it was a shame that he had to die. But maybe… he would leave the horcrux in Harry for last. Maybe by then he would have found a way to remove it from the boy without harming him, or Tom would have found a way.
The old face brightened into a smile, as Albus found a letter from Alastor. The old auror had found the place Horace had been hiding out. Maybe he had a chance to get a little more information out of the old Potions professor. One should never let go of hope.

A trill from his familiar made the old wizard look up to realize that it was time to leave for the meeting of the Wizengamot.

No need to hurry, as he only was attending as the regent for the Potter seat. But maybe he should use the opportunity to gauge the reaction the blasted article was getting.

Determined to make the best out of this complicated situation, the Headmaster left his office to walk to the edge of the wards, so he could apparate to London.

oooOOooo

At the breakfast table in Griffin House, Lord Marvolo Slytherin was chuckling quietly. He had hoped that the story would get out to the public, but he never would have guessed that it would get out so fast.

Spooning some fresh cherries – cooked and in a sweet sauce – onto his porridge, he subjected the picture accompanying the article to an intense scrutiny. It was a picture captured from a memory and seemed to be shot from an overhead angle. They had stood under a tree, and he was reasonably sure that there had not been anyone hiding out in the branches. Maybe someone on a broom under disillusionment and silencing charms? But it did not really matter in the end.

Lucius probably would start panicking by now, wondering how someone from the press had managed to breach his wards. Or if someone among his guests had been spying with the intent to sell what he or she learned to the press.

Smirking and starting to read the article for a third time, Marvolo tried to identify what part of his story that he had told the Minister had been overheard. This Skeeter woman went all in. Bringing up that he had been prefect and head boy, the award he had gotten after he had framed that half-giant Rubeus Hagrid – not that she mentioned any details – the story he had told the Minister, and pretty much everything he had had about his current situation yesterday at the party. She had thrown in a few numbers about damage to property and death from before his fall, and brushed past the tragic happenings of that night.

He had to admit, that she knew how to do her work. She had found a lot of details about him, more than he had thought anyone would be able to, who had not known him in his younger years. But he also had to say that she obviously did not care one bit for the truth.

He scoffed and added a third spoon of sugar to his tea, stirring to mix it thoroughly. Rita Skeeter exaggerated without reason, and the way she had written the headline ‘Villain or Tragic Scholar?’ already implied that she wanted to paint him as a tragic hero. And the rest of the article only added to this. Each negative fact was countered by one of her funny little positive lies. It was almost too good to be true.

As he started on his breakfast in earnest – they had to be on time for the Wizengamot, so it would not be wise to dawdle – Henry walked into the room in casual robes and with messy hair. It was a losing battle to try to tame it.
“Good morning, Henry. I hope you did sleep well?”

The teen nodded in response, settling into his chair to the right of Marvolo. “Good morning, Sir.”

Eyeing his son critically, looking for signs that the teenager was still in pain, Marvolo levitated the newspaper over to his the still half-asleep son.

Wordlessly declining the offer with a shake of his head, Henry grabbed two pieces of toast and started to spread some raspberry jam on them.

“How have you decided if you want to keep the esteemed Headmaster of Hogwarts as your regent?” Marvolo asked between two sips from his morning tea.

“I’m not sure, Sir.” Henry hedged, pouring himself a glass of orange juice.

Smiling and taking the last bite from his porridge, Marvolo explained to his son again, “You know that I will have to speak for you if you want to change who is regent and gets to vote the Potter seat. So I need to know.” He gave the teen a pointed look, and got a small nod in return.

“I will decide before we leave. Is that early enough, sir?” The last was spoken in an annoyed tone and Marvolo was happy to see the teen getting more comfortable around him. He was sure that in a few weeks he would be not so happy anymore that the fear was gone and the teenager was behaving as they all did: moody, unpredictable, unreasonable. The parents among his followers had assured him that it was normal for teenagers to rebel against their parents. And a little rebellion was something he should be strong enough to endure, hopefully.

“Make sure to decide if you want to sit on the Potter seat, or with me during the session. If you sit with me I can give you live commentary. If you choose to sit alone, I want a detailed report on your observations once we are home.”

Henry groaned and shot his guardian a disgruntled look, before concentrating solely on his breakfast. Smiling to himself, Marvolo took an apple and started to peel it. Life was much more exciting now that he could see clearly again.

Then the post arrived, levitated by the house-elf on a silver tray, and they divided the small pile between them. Almost every day Henry got a letter from one of his friends. Henry smiled and opened the letter that Marvolo guessed was from Xerxes' little grand-niece.

He himself had a few letters from different business-wizards to whom he had made inquiries about investments, one from the manager from the weaving mill that belonged to the Potter family and that he had reactivated, and one from Witch Weekly.

At Marvolo’s incredulous laugh, Henry looked up from his letter, startled.

Waving at his son Marvolo shook his head. “Do not worry, Henry. This,” he held up the envelope and the parchment that had been folded inside, “is a request from Witch Weekly for an exclusive interview.” He chuckled. “It feels quite surreal.”

The raven-haired boy rolled his eyes and returned to his own letter.

oooOoOo
At another breakfast table, Neville Longbottom was gathering his courage to ask something of his grandmother. He had really rather not ask for anything. But he had a feeling that this was something important, something that he had to do, something he really wanted to do.

Even if she despised everything that had to do with Lord Slytherin. She had ranted a lot over this man since that emergency session of the Wizengamot and even more since the trial of Sirius Black. To say that she did not like him was an understatement of gigantic proportions.

Swallowing his bite of sausage, Neville caught Augusta Longbottom’s eye.

“Gran, I was wondering if I might invite Harry over for an afternoon?”

After a long searching look, the grey-haired old witch nodded slowly. “He is a Gryffindor, is he not? And I suppose we should help him get away from that man as often as possible. So yes, you may, Neville.”

They smiled at each other, both happy. Neville for getting what he wanted, and his grandmother over the fact that her grandson was showing a little bit of initiative.

oooOOooo

They were both dressed in their family robes, clashing beautifully in their Yuletide colour combination, as they walked into the chamber of the Wizengamot, Henry just one step behind Marvolo. The teen immediately spotted his godfather standing to the side, speaking with some of the more neutral members of the chamber.

Green eyes searched for contact with glamoured blue ones, clearly asking for permission to go over and say hello to the other newcomer at this month’s regular session.

..Behave yourself:. was all Marvolo hissed to the boy, who smiled and hurried, as dignified as he could manage, over to the man in black robes with silver trim.

Marvolo nodded to Lucius, Benjamin, and Xerxes standing together and discussing the agenda of the day, walking over to Augusta Longbottom and her grandson. Time to put on the mask of polite, young Lord Slytherin, and make sure that Henry’s first real decision about his political standing was carried out.

Funny how things developed sometimes.

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Sirius quickly got rid of his current company as he saw Harry walk in behind that bastard of a Lord. He was glad about it as only moments later his godson walked as fast as was just this side of unacceptable to him, a huge smile on his face.

Returning the smile and happy greeting, Sirius gave his godson an assessing look. “You look good in Potter colours. What was that robe yesterday?”
“That was the combination of both the Slytherin and Potter colours.” With a look of remembrance Harry smiled and added, “You should have seen the other robes the tailor sent. They were horridous.”

Sirius gave the teenager in his mostly red robes a questioning look, getting a chuckle from his godson. “Green and red? It looked like Christmas decorations.”

They shared a laugh.

Sirius looked around, seeing that no one was paying them much attention and Lord Slytherin was walking over to Augusta. “How is life?” he questioned in a low voice.

Looking to the side, pulling his hand through his perpetually messy hair, Harry sighed. “I love my room in Griffin house, I love speaking to the portrait of my grandparents. But it’s so weird... living with him. I just don’t know anymore, Sirius.” The desperate and bewildered look in the green eyes, asking for reassurance and help, was almost too much for Sirius.

In a spur-of-the-moment decision, Sirius started an explanation. “Would you like a few more colours to add to those dress robes? I’m searching for an heir. I have to check the requirements, but I think you would be right. But I would understand if this would be too much responsibility,” he started rambling, and took a deep breath to get back on track. “As my heir I would have a certain influence over you…” he trailed off.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” huffed Sirius.

Harry looked unsure, but before they could get deeper into the topic, Neville walked over.

“Harry, good to see you again so soon.” He smiled and nodded politely to the adult wizard standing beside Harry. “Lord Black.”

Smiling at the son of Alice and Frank, Sirius returned the nod and the greeting. “Heir Longbottom.” The boy looked good. It irritated Sirius to no end, that the man who was somewhat responsible for the torture that rendered the parents of this boy incapable of caring for him, was standing with the boy’s grandmother, free to go as he pleased.

Getting his mind off this unpleasant topic – he could not do anything about it anyway – Sirius turned his attention back to the two teenagers speaking animatedly about what the day was to bring.

Harry seemed happy. Sirius was totally bewildered by that fact, but it was obvious. Shooting a speculating gaze at the back of Lord Slytherin, Sirius wondered if a monster could change, or if he just had changed into another kind of monster.

Probably only time would tell.

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“Madame Longbottom, may I ask for a moment of your time?” Marvolo made sure to approach the resolute witch so she could watch him the entire time, and kept his stance non-threatening, his voice polite, his bow slow and not an inch deeper than was necessary. He did not want to make her suspicious, or at least not more so than she already was.
“Neville darling, why don't you go over to your friend and talk with him. It is his first day here, after all,” were the words the witch used to send her grandson away, not averting her eyes from the younger-looking man, standing before her.

The young wizard did not hesitate, and Marvolo watched him walk over to Black and Henry.

To make sure that they were not overheard – he did not want to ruin the surprise – he waved his hand, erecting Severus’ excellent privacy charm. It would be rude to draw his wand, and it was convenient to demonstrate just how capable he was concerning magic.

“What do you want, Lord Slytherin?” her voice conveyed just enough disdain to be perceptible.

“I want to speak to you on behalf of my son.”

That got a surprised reaction from the witch. Oh, that was fun, it was a good feeling to surprise people.

“I made him read the records of the votes from the current Potter regent. I wanted him to decide if he was happy with the way the Potter seat had been used.” He briefly looked over to his son, checking on him, before continuing. “He was not happy. And so I asked him to name another person.” He gave her his most charming smile, delighted over the way she narrowed her eyes at him.

“I know that it is highly unusual to ask so suddenly, but Henry only told me about his decision before we left the house this morning.” He watched the understanding dawning on the lines of the face of Augusta Longbottom. “Would you be willing to be the regent of Potter until my son comes of age and will be able to take over the seat himself?”

“You are serious,” were the first shocked words after a long moment of silence. Marvolo stood silent and let her eyes roam over his face, searching for deception, sure she would find none, as he was sincere with his request. Henry needed to learn to make decisions and trust in his judgement. At the moment, he felt that this witch would represent his political ideals the best.

Marvolo would have enough time in the next two years to sway the boy away from Dumbledore’s way of thinking, and giving him enough room to come to the right conclusions while feeling in control would only help in the long run.

The boy had been failed by almost all adults in his life. Proving to be reliable would give him a tremendous advantage.

“I am honoured by your request. I agree to be the Potter regent. We will arrange meetings between Heir Potter and me to discuss his political goals, and Neville has stated his interest in spending more time with… your son, Lord Slytherin.”

She clearly was not happy calling Henry his son, but Marvolo did not mind, he was getting what he wanted. Smiling winningly, he took down the charm again, nodding in the direction of the Ministry seats, indicating the people getting to their seats. “I thank you, and I am sure we will be able to find time for those meetings. It seems the session is about to start. Madame Longbottom.”

They parted and made their way over to their respective seats.

Now to see what Henry would decide on where he wanted to sit for the day.
Harry listened intently to Neville telling about his lessons preparing him to one day take over the Longbottom seat. Once again anger filled him over the Headmaster’s decision to keep him in the dark, he did not understand why the old man had done so. What was the purpose?

“Where will you sit?” the other Gryffindor wanted to know.

“I haven’t decided yet,” was Harry’s answer, and he looked over to the Slytherin seat, carried by two coiled snakes, and then to the Potter seat in the row in the middle, carried by a male and a female lion, seemingly made from some sort of clay.

“What do you mean ‘you have not decided yet’, Harry?” Sirius wanted to know, looking back and forth between the rows of seats and his godson.

“He said I can sit with him, with him giving commentary, or sit on the Potter seat and give a report at the end of the day.” Rolling his eyes and huffing an irritated sigh, Harry explained, “I think he demands that to make sure that I do not start daydreaming.”

“And where do you want to sit?” Neville looked curious and slightly terrified at the idea of sitting near the man that had once been Voldemort.

“Not really sure.” Harry eyed the stool standing in front of the bench made of clay. “I do not fancy sitting the entire day so close to the Headmaster.” Harry scowled at the bearded wizard striding in through the doors, long after almost everyone else had already arrived. “I get why he wanted me to grow up out of the spotlight. But he could have made sure that I learned everything I need to know. Now I have to cram all that into a little over two years.”

Sirius nodded and looked at his godson with calculating eyes. “There is something more, Harry. I know that look. What prank is about to be played?”

Neville looked confused but Harry sported a grin. Yes a prank, that was what it could be called. The Headmaster was about to experience quite the surprise. Only in a fleeting thought did he remember with whom he had planned what was to happen today. Regardless who was involved, the Headmaster had left him with the Dursleys, had never checked on him, and had kept too much too important information from him. A prophecy, that he was carrying a part of a soul around with him? No, the man was not trustworthy. And it was a chance to test if Voldemort would keep his word.

“I think I should go over. See you later.” Harry smiled and gave a little bow to the other two. “Sirius. Neville.” They parted ways, Neville going to his grandmother, taking a seat on the cherry wood bench carved with vines and blossoms beside her, Sirius walking over to the seat of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, a bench out of black, silver-veined marble resting on two big crows, and Harry walking over to the stained silver seat of the Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin.

Let the show begin.
Marvolo felt smug as he saw Henry walking over to the Slytherin seat and not the Potter one. This day was promising to get good.

“Sit down, keep quiet and observe, Henry,” he quietly said to his son, lightly placing his hand on the boy’s shoulder, guiding him to sit on the right side of the bench. Then he sat down beside the teen, folding his hands over his knee, crossing his legs and letting his gaze wander around the hall, watching as the others took their places.

“Do you remember the sequence of procedure for a Wizengamot session?” They had not much time for Henry to learn all that he needed, so Marvolo turned everything he could into a lesson. After the announcements from the Chief Warlock, each of the Lords and Ladies would be asked if they had something to announce, and newcomers would be called to give the oath.

Alphabetical order, so he would have to wait to near the end. And Black would be one of the first.

After Lord Abbott had called them all to order, and the last of the Lords and Ladies had taken their seats, the Chief Warlock started with the announcements. Listening with one ear, Marvolo checked on his followers. Lucius had brought his son, but Benjamin had let his stay at home. Probably to keep his new, younger son company. Many had brought their heirs, but many benches still were empty. Maybe he could manage before the end of the year that one more seat was once more filled.

They were asked to make known if they wanted to announce something, and Marvolo sent his little scroll over to the secretaries with a wandless floating charm. He felt a smile curl his lips: his first Wizengamot session, a day to celebrate.

One of the secretaries, a red-haired, lanky, young wizard, compiled the different little scrolls into one long list and handed it over to the Chief Warlock.

“We now start with the oath for our new members. Lord Black, if you would be so kind as to stand.”

A few seats to the right, Sirius Black stood from the bench, getting his wand out of the sleeve of his silk robes. He placed his wand, holding it with both hands, over his heart and looked determinedly in the direction of the Chief Warlock.

“Lord Sirius Orion Black, why have you come here today?”

“I came to claim my rightful place in the midst of the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot.”

“Are you willing to swear an oath? If you are, speak after me.”

Marvolo watched Henry watching the proceedings with rapt attention.

Lord Abbott started to state the oath all members of the Wizengamot had to swear the first time they came to a session.

“I, Lord Sirius Orion Black.”

And the last of the Blacks – the last of the direct line – repeated the words with the gravity appropriate for the occasion. “I, Lord Sirius Orion Black,”

“Swear my most solemn oath.”

“Swear my most solemn oath.”
“To always work for the good of the Magicals of Britain, to the best of my knowledge.”

Magic started to build up, not as thick at it had been the day he had claimed his title as Lord Slytherin, but noticeable nonetheless.

“To always work for the good of the Magicals of Britain, to the best of my knowledge.”

“So mote it be.”

“So mote it be,” repeated Lord Black and with a bright flash of light the oath took effect.

“That is all?” came a baffled whisper from the teenager on the bench beside him. “That is the oath that's supposed to make sure that the members of the Wizengamot are…” the teen struggled to find the words to express his disbelief, and Marvolo chuckled quietly.

“It would be a ridiculous oath if that was its true purpose.”

Green eyes looked questioningly up to Marvolo, they had come a long way since that disastrous first day.

“The purpose is to make sure that each of the members bases his or her actions alone on their moral compass. Not to be swayed by blackmail, fear, or outright force. If one wants to grant even a small measure of free will, oaths tend to be quite weak and open to interpretation.”

A small frustrated huff came from Henry, who watched Black sit back down. “So it is basically pointless.” After a small pause the teenager hissed.:And you could continue like you did before, sir:. Marvolo contemplated for a moment before he hissed his reply. .:If I was convinced that it was the best for our community, then you are right, I could continue the same way. But that would not be the best:. The look from the teenager was sceptical, but he stayed silent and turned his attention back to the proceedings.

“Lord Marvolo Slytherin, why have you come here today?” Chief Warlock Abbott now directed his words to the youngest-looking man wearing a Lordship ring in the room.

Marvolo stood, his wavy brown hair brushing along the high collar of the shimmering dark green robe, getting his wand out of its holster, smirking inside as he saw several people flinch. Intoning the traditional words, Marvolo noticed the pinched look and forced smile on the Headmaster’s face, where he sat on the small wooden stool in front of the Potter bench. “I came to claim my rightful place in the midst of the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot.”

The words of the oath were repeated and Marvolo felt the magic settle in him alongside the oath he had taken a few weeks before.

A few unimportant notices later, Lestrange was called to make his announcement.

“I, Xerxes Lestrange, change the rules of inheritance for the seat of the Noble House of Lestrange. From this day onwards, the position as Head of House can be held by a witch, as can be the position as heiress. By the magic of our family, so mote it be.”

A murmur swept through the hall. They all knew of the plight of the family Lestrange: the current
Lord not married and unlikely to have more children, the only sons without children and in Azkaban for life. For as long as anyone could remember, the Lestrange Head of House always had been a wizard. But now the position could be held by a woman.

That move was sure to create rumours. Was there a witch waiting in the wings? Someone that could take over once the current Lord would die? Marvolo knew, of course, that there was a possible someone: Henry’s little friend, the incredibly intelligent Hermione Granger. It seemed as if his old friend hoped to convince her to become heiress.

Their gazes briefly met, and Marvolo nodded with a small smile. A good move, even if he should fail at convincing the young witch. There just might be more Squib lines to be discovered.

Benjamin announced the adoption of Aidan, an announcement no one was surprised by, they all had been invited to the ceremony, after all, and quickly the letters went by. Until “Potter” was called.

Dumbledore made to stand, but Marvolo waved him back into his seat, standing himself. “As the adoptive father of the Potter heir, I will speak for my son.”

Another murmur swept through the Wizengamot, and Marvolo spotted some smirks and some disturbed faces among those attending.

Turning to the front and concentrating on the round face of Lord Abbott, Marvolo smiled and started with his announcement. “My son is not happy with the way the Potter seat was voted in the past decade. And I’m not happy with the way the current regent has performed his duties. Therefore Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore will no longer be the Potter regent from today.”

Chaos erupted at this proclamation. It took several minutes to quiet the enraged witches and wizards down again. Funny that they did not react this violently and loudly as they had to free him from his past crimes, but now that he was about to change who was regent for his son, they made a fuss.

Maybe because this was much easier to process and a move they had anticipated, in contrast to his suddenly appearing before them, looking totally different, unearthing an ancient law no one had heard about before and pleading to be declared alive again. They had come to terms with the fact that he had not actually died that night.

With a face as red as a howler, Lord Abbott sat down again, waving for Marvolo to continue, glaring at all the others to stay silent. Nodding in assent, Marvolo did just that. “I asked Madame Longbottom if she would take the position as Potter regent, and she agreed. So from today, Madame Longbottom will be regent for my son, the way he wishes it to be.”

And more whispering and murmurs were the result of this.

Marvolo had to really control his face to prevent the smirk from showing, as his eyes fell on the flummoxed faces of his followers. That was not something they had seen coming. Not at all.

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Harry realized quickly that most of the work in the Wizengamot was boring. Well, from his
perspective at least. After the hubbub from the announcement and the joke of an oath Sirius and… his momentary guardian had had to make, it got rather hard to keep paying attention.

At the moment, two Lords were having a heated debate over fees for importing cauldrons. It sounded distressingly like Percy lecturing over the thickness of the bottoms of said cauldrons.

He rolled green eyes as the Lords slid into childish insults. And startled at the quiet chuckling from beside him.

.:They tend to do that, or so Lucius told me:. hissed Voldemort in his direction, clearly sounding amused.

.:That is utterly unproductive! Why is the Chief Warlock not doing anything about it?:. Rubbing his scar, Harry suppressed a yawn. It was really hard to pay attention. He was glad that he had chosen to sit on the Slytherin bench with Voldemort, otherwise he would have had trouble giving a report at the end of the day. What a surreal thought.

.:Stay awake, Henry. Is the scar bothering you?:. Was there worry in the hissed words? Harry was not sure.

He shook his head. .:No, sir. Just a regular headache:. 

:.If you are sure:. 

They listened to some more childish bickering before the Chief Warlock finally called a halt to it and called for a vote. Voldemort raised his wand with those against the raise of the fees, hissing the explanation to Harry that there was no reason to raise them except that the one Lord had invested in some apothecaries and would lose money if the fees for cauldron import were raised, and both families did not get along well.

Harry was amazed how childish politicians seemed to be.

The next point on the agenda was a new law proposal regarding werewolves.

Harry immediately recognized the witch they had met on the day of Sirius' trial. She stood and cleared her throat, trying to get the attention of the assembled members.

“The elusive Madame Umbridge. It is surprisingly hard to get any information about her,” murmured Voldemort near Harry’s ear, continuing with the promised live commentary he had provided at every turn.

As the witch finally began speaking about the law she wanted to see passed, the green-eyed teenager quickly realized that the woman was in her own personal war against werewolves. She cited statistics about an increase of near-attacks, near-fatal attacks, and newly infected in the last years, claiming that the aurors had to take a harder stance against the ‘monsters’.

And suddenly Voldemort was standing, and all eyes turned away from the speaking witch to rest on him.

“How sorry, Madame, but may I ask a few questions of you?” he sounded so polite. Harry wondered if Voldemort would consider a career as an actor if this taking over the Ministry plan didn’t work. Wrenching his concentration back to the reality happening around him, Harry almost laughed over his absurd thoughts.

Clearly irritated, Umbridge nodded, “Sure, you may, Lord Slytherin.”
“Is it true that the increase in the number of attacks from werewolves started after they were denied the right to possess land or property, after employers were made responsible for eventual slip-ups rendering werewolves unable to find work?” He made only a short pause, mockingly raising one brow, before he continued. “We have the means to keep ourselves safe, to keep them safe. We can ward a stretch of fields and woods, we have the wolfsbane potion. But the laws we currently have prevent werewolves from paying someone to ward a place, or buy the potion. They can’t even do it for themselves, because we deny them a proper education. That is where we are wrong, and the law you were about to propose would only make the situation worse.”

The chamber was pandemonium after that. Umbridge tried to claim that all werewolves were monsters that did not want to keep away from potential victims on the nights of the full moon. Some demanded to see those statistics, others brought up topics that only were a tangent to the original problem: unemployment in general, low qualifications of werewolves, the lacking quality of school brooms at Hogwarts.

Harry only tried to follow the different directions conversations – mostly shouted – were taking before he gave up, rubbing his scar.

The new law was neither discussed nor voted on in this session, and the Chief Warlock called for the lunch break quickly to get the mass of people under control again.

While they were waiting for the room to empty, so they could walk over to the smaller chamber holding a buffet to grab a bite to eat and something to drink, Harry turned to the man in green robes standing beside him.

.:Why do you… why standing up for werewolves?: He wanted to know this now, and to avoid being overheard he used parseltongue as they had done throughout the morning.

.:I may have made a promise to get rid of the oppression against werewolves the Ministry enacts:. was the nonchalant answer, given with a small smile. :I may had planned to use other means to get it done, but I’m still able to work to that goal:.

Harry frowned. “I do not really know what your goals are. Now, I mean.”

“No, you can’t. I have not told you, so how could you know?” The man looked down at Harry, clearly contemplating what else to say. “I do not think that it would work out if I were to simply tell you. But you can ask me what I think of a particular subject. I will do my best to explain my point of view to you. Maybe not then and there, but when there is enough time and privacy.”

Not sure if he could believe this statement, and fully aware how ambiguous and open to interpretation it was, Harry just nodded and followed Voldemort over to the buffet, hoping that something to eat and a glass of water would help with his headache.

And so they walked over to the buffet through all the others, mingling and talking, avoiding those that they could not stand and connecting to their allies.

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Lucius felt like someone had grabbed the rug he had been standing on and had jerked it away. His Lord appointing a Longbottom as regent for his son? He could not quite wrap his head around it
He took a little cucumber sandwich from one of the plates. The morning had been quite amusing, seeing Dumbledore leave after he had been replaced by Madame Longbottom as regent and finally his Lord’s passionate, if short, speech about werewolves, he was glad that he had taken Draco with him today. Mostly these sessions were tediously boring.

Seeing his son looking over to the Longbottom boy standing with his Lord’s heir, Lucius nodded to the blond boy. “Go over and speak with them. Take a break from all us boring adults.”

“Thank you, father,” Draco quietly replied, straightening his robes and walking over, visibly steeling himself for the conversation with two Gryffindors.

As Lucius turned back to the buffet, Lord Slytherin and Lord Nott stepped up to him, and they started an easy conversation. He waited for the perfect opportunity to bring up the topic he had wanted to discuss for a few days now. It presented itself when Benjamin started to speak about tutors he wanted to hire to teach Aiden.

“Master Snape will take Draco on a trip to collect ingredients in the woods. I promised him to ask if your sons could accompany him.”

Smirking, Lord Slytherin asked, “And Master Snape knows about his luck to be responsible for three teenage boys at the same time?”

“I told him of the plan to invite the others, he was not overly thrilled, but agreed.” Lucius assured, aware that Severus normally liked to keep to only one child per tutoring session.

“When is he planning on going to gather ingredients, and what will he be gathering? And where?” Benjamin wanted to know.

“He mentioned the Forest of Dean, and I think he will not change the location, as he was going to request a portkey for travelling with three teenagers, and something about collecting different ferns, mosses, and lichen,” Lucius explained, taking a sip from a glass of lemonade. “And I proposed next Saturday, the twenty-ninth. Does the date agree with you?”

They agreed to the outing for their sons, and Nott House was appointed as the meeting point, so that Severus could pick the boys up.

After that they split up and spoke to others until the break was called to an end, and they continued with much more normal topics until the evening.

It was infuriating. The nerve of that man! But he would get what he deserved. It seemed to be ridiculously easy to get him out of the way, even without targeting the man himself. A short chat with the secretary of the portkey office and the place and time was clear.

Now plump fingers grabbed a form and a quill, filling out the information needed. Place and time, different numbers, a name, and placing filled-in form with stamp and seal placed between many others, and all was set.
In not a week's time the problem would be out of the way. There was no way he would be able to stay in his position and in her way any longer. In the next meeting all would go as planned.

Harry sat on the chair in front of his desk in his room, writing a letter to Hermione. He wanted to tell someone of his day at the Wizengamot. And telling Ron was not really an option. For one, Harry was certain his friend would not be interested, and he had not replied to the last letter Harry had sent. Maybe Ron was still angry over what had happened, or maybe jealous. They had disagreed over the way Ron had treated Hermione, and it seemed that he still was sulking.

So he was writing to Hermione. She would likely pester him with questions in her next letter. About the session of the Wizengamot, his lessons, and probably about his life with Voldemort.

He in turn had questions for her. How the meeting with the brother of her grandmother had gone, if she had known he would change the rules about who might hold the position of Head of House for the family Lestrange, what she was going to do about the whole mess.

Standing to get rid of his outer robe – it was hot in his room despite the open window – Harry paced a little. Over dinner his current guardian had asked him what he wanted to do on his birthday. And Harry was unsure what he wanted. He wanted to have a party with his friends, and Voldemort had told him it was expected to give a party for the families of the Wizengamot members. Maybe he could get both?

Only a week until his birthday, the first laden with expectations and social obligations. What a mess.

The teen sat down again, finishing his letter to Hermione, who might find herself in a similar situation to his. Thrust into the life of an heir, or heiress in her case, ignorant of their ancestry until now.

Maybe he should invite her over one of the next few days.

Chapter End Notes

Not sure if I was too transparent or too cryptic. So may I ask you to leave your speculation on the direction this is taking and what will happen in the near future? I really would like to know if my hinting was too obvious or not obvious enough :D

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published: 29th of April 2016
Hermione walked into the kitchen, where her mother sat drinking a cup of tea and reading the morning paper. The young witch held two letters and the morning edition of the Daily Prophet in her hands, biting her lower lip. She needed to talk to someone. Ron would not understand, Harry was not reachable without hassle, and her father was at work, so only her mother was available.

Not that she would hesitate to speak to her mother about her problems, at least not everyday normal girl problems, but what to make of her recently discovered magical ancestry in light of the current political climate in the wizarding part of Britain was different. It was a tad more complicated than how to know if a boy might like her.

“Mum? Do you have a moment?” the girl got her mother’s attention.

“Sure, sweetheart. What's troubling you?” The brown-haired woman folded her newspaper and placed it on the table, concentrating on her daughter.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione took a seat across from her mother, deciding that it was time she told her parents more about what was happening in the magical world.

“I’m not sure what I should do about Lord Lestrange.” Hermione opened the wizarding newspaper to the politics section, pointing to the article about yesterday’s Wizengamot session. “Yesterday he changed the rules governing the family's legal order of succession. Before, only wizards could become Head of House Lestrange. Now this position can be held by a witch as well.”

Hermione saw understanding dawn in her mother’s eyes. She always was quick in analysing a situation. “Who is the current heir?” the muggle woman wanted to know, tucking a strand of curly brown hair behind her ear, out of her face.

“No one,” answered Hermione, getting a questioning gaze from her mother. “Both his sons are currently residing in Azkaban, the wizarding prison. And their sentence was for life.”

“So you think he might make you the heiress?” the older woman concentrated on the important part, her intense eyes focused on the still worried Hermione.

For this sort of practicality, Hermione loved her mother. Her father was more like her in wanting to know every detail, obsessing over the small parts. Her mother disregarded large parts that were not of immediate importance. Like why the sons of Lord Lestrange were in prison. It did not pertain to Hermione's worries about what she should do about the situation, or so it seemed at least, so she concentrated on the more central points of the question.

“He already offered,” the young witch explained, holding up the letter with the seal of the Lestrange family on the outside of the envelope.

“He wrote about his wish for me to carry on the family. Offered tutoring so I could get to learn what I wished over the holidays, could learn what I need to know if I were to accept.” Hermione took a deep breath so as not to fall into rambling, fiddling with the paper and the letters in her hands.

“And you're uncertain if you should accept his offer, because...? I got the feeling he is a decent
man the afternoon we met.”

That was her chance, her chance to really tell her mother what was going on in the wizarding world. In the last years she always had glossed over the worst parts, mentioning them in passing, not going into details. But if she wanted to get real advice, if she wanted to keep her parents, she had to tell them the truth. And with this recently discovered connection, she hoped they would be less likely to try to keep her away.

“Do you remember me telling you and dad about the war that ended when the Potters were attacked?”

Jean Granger nodded that she did remember.

“Well, those two sons are in prison for belonging to the dark wizard’s organization and killing and torturing in his name.”

Waiting patiently as her daughter ordered her thoughts, Jean poured herself another cup of tea.

“It was suspected that Xerxes was also part of that organization. And, well…” in for a knut, in for a sickle. Hermione took a deep breath. “It seems that the dark wizard leading these… terrorists may be the best description… was not really dead.”

“How can someone be not really dead?” asked Hermione’s mother, more curious than anything else.

“I don’t know. Not really... he did something to prevent himself from dying, and it seems to have worked. Anyway, he came back at the end of the tournament that was held at Hogwarts, and claims that he was under the influence of some ancient curse.”

“And you don’t believe a word of this?” Jean prompted her daughter.

“Yes, no? I don’t know!” Hermione exclaimed, getting up from her chair, pushing it back and starting to pace in front of the kitchen cabinets.

Silence settled over the kitchen. Hermione paced agitatedly up and down, her slippers making no sound on the black and white tiled floor. Jean Granger sat contemplating the sparse information given by her daughter.

Finally Hermione slumped back into the chair she had vacated earlier, looking to her mother for help to clear the mess and order her tumultuous thoughts.

“You call them terrorists. What are their goals? All terrorist organizations have some kind of goal they claim to be working towards.”

Hermione furrowed her brow. “I’m not really sure. I only know what has been told by families called light. And have read what is written in the history books. But as all history is written by the winner, and the light side won, I would speculate that I only have a biased view.”

As her mother stayed silent, Hermione continued to voice her thoughts on the topic. Listing the few facts she had. “They supposedly want to get rid of the so-called muggle-born, preserving the old traditions, practising what is called dark magic. Some of the older families, like the Lestranges, are claimed to be dark. Whatever that term even means.”

A quirked eyebrow urged her to continue.
“I tried to look up the definition. But all I could find looked like it is just a label attached to anything that the Ministry or some other influential party does not want to be used any more. I couldn't even find a comprehensive list of supposedly dark magic. This feels a lot like censorship, and I do not like this. At all.”

Hermione saw the fond smile of her mother, clearly remembering that one time when one over-eager mother had tried to ban several classics from the school library, because she thought them to be inappropriate for children to read. Hermione had gathered what support she could and organized a collection of signatures, banners, and posters to hang around the school, even a small rally in front of the school library, to halt what she had called censorship.

“And well, loss of tradition is a problem all around the world, I guess. So I could understand that. And I detest censorship.” She chewed on her lower lip. “Harry was adopted by Lord Slytherin. I told you about that, right?” Hermione glanced at her mother, who nodded, before looking down to the letters again.

“That's the man who was the one leading the Death Eaters, the terrorist organization, but he was declared not responsible for all the crimes that were committed before Harry defeated him in ‘81.

“I’m just so confused, mum.” Hermione let her head drop into her hands, her bushy locks falling haphazardly around her head and onto the table. “Harry didn't know a thing about his responsibilities as the last Potter. About his seat in the Wizengamot. Mr. Black had no trial, even if Albus Dumbledore as Chief Warlock would have had to make sure he would get one. Why would those that are supposed to be the good ones do such a thing? And Harry wrote to me, that Lord Slytherin is working against the nasty laws regarding werewolves that are in effect right now. Why would he do that? Why would he offer to introduce me to Lord Lestrange if he truly was evil?”

Desperation in her voice, Hermione looked up to her mother, who had her thinking face firmly in place.

“Xerxes knows about your view on the world?”

Hermione nodded.

“So he offered you the chance to become the next Head of House despite you having grown up in the Muggle world?”

The girl nodded again, her curls bouncing around her.

“And as a Head of House you would get to sit on this… Wizengamot? Decide on the laws?”

Hermione nodded again and started to see where her mother was going. “And act as a judge in court. You think I should accept this chance and then make change happen from within?”

“I propose that you try to get more information from another source. You admit that your information is most likely biased, and I know that you are a capable researcher. So I guess you need to find another source of information. Xerxes can be that. And I think your dad would be only too happy to get to know his uncle better. Don’t you think?”

Nodding happily, jumping up from her chair, bending over the table to give her mother a peck on her cheek, Hermione grabbed her letters and the paper, dashing from the kitchen and to her room.

Now she knew what she would do. She would write Xerxes – he had insisted on being called Uncle Xerxes by them all – to state her wish to get to know him better, and to learn more so she could decide if she felt up to the responsibility of being heiress. She thought it a clever way to get more
information without committing to something she might not want in the end.

And she would write a long letter to Harry. He had complained about dancing lessons in one of his last letters. Maybe he would tolerate them better if she would be taking part in them. She had gone to a summer course on dancing before fourth year, but dancing in the wizarding world probably was a little different. Also, she needed to see more of how Harry was with his new guardian, needed to see if he was being treated right.

Getting out a new piece of parchment, she started to make drafts for her two letters.

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In the kitchen Jean Granger drained her cup of tea. She remembered the long discussions she and her husband had had after Hermione had gone off to a school somewhere to learn about magic. Smiling at the thought that Hermione still did not know how much information her parents had been given by the deputy headmistress, she reiterated the conclusion they had reached after the incident with the petrification in her second year.

She was a witch and nothing would change this. She had found friends, a first for their daughter. Keeping her from her world, however dangerous it might be, would do no good, because those dangers were likely to follow her. After all, those dangers surrounded them all. Not being able to see them did not change that.

They had learned about the prejudice of the wizarding world, the dangerous things that happened at the school. But they had decided to support their daughter and accept her wish to keep them ignorant about the dangers they could do nothing about.

It seemed they had been right: the dangers would follow their daughter, but it seemed that she might be able to come into a position to create real change. That thought made her smile. Hermione was such a determined girl if a topic caught her interest. And there was nothing she was more interested in then fairness, equal rights, and opportunities for all. The wizarding world would not know what was happening if she should decide to take up the mantle of heiress.

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Standing awkwardly in the reception room of Nott House, three teenagers waited for their potions instructor.

Draco had to try hard not to fidget or tug at the hems of the sleeves of his sturdy robes. His mother had insisted he wear something sturdy enough to wander through the woods, and not his favourite summer robes of linen and silk. So now he was wearing robes of cotton twill in a nondescript brown colour. He was not really happy with that, but after he had stepped out of the Floo, finding the other two already waiting with robes of much the same material, he had felt better.

But now Potter – no, Slytherin – ignored him in favour of talking with Theo about Aiden and his new tutor. It was infuriating. How could he manage to become a friend to the Dark Lord’s heir if he was not even speaking with him?
Taking a few steps so he was standing next to Potter – no, Slytherin! – in his moss-green robes and Theo in his dark blue ones, Draco tried to integrate himself into the conversation.

He had just opened his mouth to add a comment about being home-schooled for the basics like reading and writing, as the boy with his messy black hair turned so his back was to Draco and didn't even try to let it look accidental.

The blond teen was getting frustrated. His father had told him to get closer to the Potter boy, to become his friend and guide. And after what he had seen the Dark Lord do to the traitor in their entrance hall at Malfoy Manor, he was certain that he would not risk being on the boy’s bad side. Considering how their interactions had been in the last years, he had his work cut out for him. But he did not know what to do.

So he fell back onto well trodden paths. “It is rude to just ignore me!” Draco drawled, shoving his way between the two others, gaining their attention the only way he could think of.

Theo was rolling his eyes at his old friend, and stepped back, letting what was to happen run its course. Draco noticed his friend not taking his side but was much too agitated to process what was happening and act accordingly.

“And you're not rude at all?” asked the Slytherin heir, raising a brow and not backing away.

A little irritated, Draco noticed that they were almost the same height now, but he took another step, coming chest-to-chest with the other teen. “Why do you make it so difficult? I’m trying to be friendly here. We ought to be friends, you know? I can help you.” The blond spoke with urgency, trying to force the other to see reason, to understand, his grey eyes practically sparking.

He took two steps back in shock as the other boy gave an incredulous laugh, shaking his head. “Did someone mix something into your breakfast this morning?” Green eyes wandered up and down Draco’s figure. “Maybe I have it wrong, but two encounters with barely polite interaction are no grounds for friendship. Especially considering the abysmal former interactions we've had.”

Before the spluttering Draco could manage a response to that accusation, the young Slytherin heir continued with contempt clear in his words. “Let’s see… first time we met you insulted the person I was with and then me, even if you might not have known. Second time we met, you insulted the one I was with for his family’s lack of wealth, and me by claiming I was unable to make good choices for friends. And your tendency towards insults, bigotry, and childish taunts just continued from there.”

The sneer now gracing the face with its green eyes would have been worthy to adorn the Potions Master’s face and made Draco take another step back.

“A lot more would have to happen before I ever would consider being friends with you, Draco Malfoy.”

Silver-grey eyes widened at that statement. He would be in so much trouble once his father heard about this.

“But you're friends with Theo!” Draco wailed, throwing up his hands. Only a small voice in the back of his head tried to gain his attention to point out that he was behaving like a spoilt three-year-old.

“Leave me out of this,” Theodore said, looking mildly horrified, taking a step back, and holding up his hands before him like warding off some noisy girls.
A head covered in messy black hair shook. “You don't get it.” The green-eyed teen sighed. “And I would say Theodore and I are friendly acquaintances. Maybe we can become friends somewhere in the future, but it takes more to be friends then playing a game of Quidditch now and then.”

With that the other boys again ignored Draco, who walked over to one of the tiny love-seats situated around the room, sitting down gracelessly, pondering what he could have done differently. How could he get the Dark Lord’s son to be friends with him? Was it even possible after this?

While he was cooling down, thinking about all that had been said, Draco realized that the other teen had been right. He had a tendency to insult others, and he loved the laughs he could get from his house-mates, the fact that he was the centre of attention when he put someone down. Contemplating where this behaviour had ended with one that now suddenly held a position of power, he started to realize that the moments of fun and attention might not be worth the troubles they might bring in the future.

Draco hoped that the heir Slytherin-Potter would be agreeable to being civil to each other. He would be glad if he could manage a truce and work from there.

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Taking a last look at himself in the mirror, Severus checked a final time that he had everything he would need for an afternoon with teenagers in the forest. His emergency potions kit was distributed among the many pockets of his short, new – and above all, light – robes. Antidotes to some of the more common plants, sunburn paste, blood-replenishing potions... it may seem a bit over-cautious, but he would be responsible for the heirs of three Lords of the Wizengamot. Discretion was the better part of valour, after all.

He placed his dragon-hide gloves in the outer pocket and checked that his dark brown trousers were tucked into his new boots. He was pleased with his new robes and clothes. He had exchanged some of his older black ones for others in dark, muted but nonetheless coloured robes, shirts, and trousers. The robes he had selected today only reached his knees, making for easier movement in the shrubs of the forest.

Stacking four willow baskets and placing the knives in them, Severus walked down from his room to the Floo in his living room. Time for the afternoon Lucius had talked him into.

The blond wizard had sought an opportunity for his son to spend more time with their Lord’s heir before the summer holidays were over and the students would return to Hogwarts for another year. Severus had agreed reluctantly because he doubted that the afternoon would do any good. He would see what the day would bring.

A moment later he was standing in the receiving room of Nott House, looking at a sulking Draco sitting by himself and two animatedly talking dark-haired boys standing a few paces away from the Floo.

Sighing inwardly, Severus realised that the afternoon had already started to go wrong. At least they were not fighting with fists or casting curses at each other.

The students noticed their teacher’s presence and moved to stand before him, forming a line with
Draco on one end, Theodore Nott in the middle, and the adopted son of his Lord at the other end.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. Do you all have your wands with you?” Each boy nodded, showing that they had them on them indeed. “And your dragon-hide gloves?” Three pairs of gloves were shown, and Severus noticed that the Dark Lord obviously had purchased a new pair for his adopted son.

Nodding in approval, Severus handed out a basket with a knife to each boy. “We will be gathering different mosses, ferns, and lichens today. As there are several plants that can provoke unpleasant rashes, you will wear your gloves the entire time.” He got a series of nods from the boys and got out the portkey, holding it so that they all could touch it.

Moments later they were in the middle of the Forest of Dean. Sunlight was filtering through the leaves, casting them all in a pleasant green light.

Mr. Nott and Mr. Malfoy – in a setting such as this, Severus preferred to think of his students the way he would address them at school – had managed to remain standing, but Mr. Slytherin had landed on his behind in a bush of nettles. The boy looked mortified and a little too pale.

Mr. Nott managed to get the other teen on his feet again, and Severus realized with a start that travelling by portkey might trigger some unpleasant memories for Lily’s son.

Deciding that it might be best to pretend that nothing of importance had happened, Severus walked over to a tree that had some of the lichens on its bark that he wanted to harvest on this trip. He started to demonstrate how to identify the different plants they were to collect and harvest correctly, he let his mind wander.

Henry Slytherin-Potter – he repeated the name in his mind as often as possible so as to ingrain it and prevent slipping up – had proven to be quite different from what the Potions Master had assumed. After he had learned how different the boy’s life had been and that he had not received the education he should have had, it had been rather easy to see where the perceived arrogance and disregard for rules had come from.

The two potions lessons they had had, and the two lessons on Occlumency had gone quite well. The teenager paid attention, asked intelligent questions – considering his lack of knowledge through no fault of his own – and worked well with adequate instruction.

Yesterday they had had their second Occlumency lesson, putting into practice what they had studied in the first lesson. Severus had guided his student in a meditation, a variant concentrating on filling the boy’s mind with the images of a repetitive task combined with a calming breathing pattern. It had surprised the dour man that the young wizard had selected the weeding of a garden and the tending of plants as the images. Despite his surprise, he had to concede that the selected method was suitable for the active mind of a Gryffindor who tended to wear his heart on his sleeve.

All boys had now demonstrated that they had understood how they were supposed to collect the ingredients, and Severus returned his full concentration to his students once more.

“We will split into two groups.” Catching a pleading look from Draco, Severus reconsidered the pairing he’d had in mind. “Mr. Nott, you and Mr. Slytherin will go together. Stay in viewing distance of each other, and be back here before it goes completely dark. Mr. Malfoy will come with me.” Dark eyes looked between the students before him. “Any more questions?”

“No, sir,” was the reply in three different voices.
“Good,” nodded the professor. “Before you go off, let me cast an insect repelling charm on all of us. I do not wish for you to pick up ticks or get pestered by gnats.” He cast the handy charm he had learned after Lily had found it one summer over each of them.

And with this they parted ways. Severus and the blond teen walked in silence over the leaf-covered ground, listening to the fading voices of the two other teens speaking to each other, trying to agree on a direction to walk in.

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They now had been gathering for almost an hour and Draco had kept throwing glances at him whenever he thought that the teacher was not looking. Severus was quietly amused by this but kept his mouth shut. Whenever Draco was ready he would speak his mind, and until that time Severus would enjoy the quiet and tranquil atmosphere, the little insects flying through sunbeams, and the birds singing from somewhere up in the trees.

“Sir, might I ask you a question?” an embarrassed teen asked of his teacher, fiddling with his knife, cutting some fern close to the ground.

“I’m here to teach you, Mr. Malfoy. This includes answering all questions you might have about the subject you are here to learn.” Judging by the tone and the time it had taken the youth to come out with it, Severus doubted that the question had anything to do with the gathering of potion ingredients, but he was not inclined to make it any easier on Draco.

“The question I need your help with, sir, is more one I would ask of my Head of House.”

Succeeding in getting the fern cut, Draco stored it in the basket already filled with several other fern stems before he got up from the ground and looked at the Head of House Slytherin at Hogwarts.

Sighing to himself, Severus placed a handful of moss into his own basket and turned to the young man who was shifting from foot to foot, his cheeks decidedly more flushed than they normally were. Was it the heat of the day, the activity, or maybe embarrassment?

“Why do you want to ask me? We are not at school at the moment, and you certainly could ask your parents for advice, or not?”

Draco looked down to his feet, then up again. “I need advice on something my father wants me to do. I fear that I will be unable to fulfil his wishes.”

Sighing again – louder this time – Severus nodded and set his basket down, turning fully to face Draco. “I will listen and give you advice if I am able.”

Swallowing, Draco nodded and started speaking. “My father wants me to become friends with our Lord’s heir. I tried and failed before. Now I tried again today, but I don’t think that it will work out.”

That had not really been a question, but what the boy wanted to know was obvious enough. “You want my advice on how you can become Mr. Slytherin’s friend?” Severus asked for clarification, clasping his hands behind his back.

To his surprise Draco shook his head. “No, he made it quite clear that this will probably not
happen.” The teen took a fortifying breath. “No, I fear what father and the Dark Lord might do if I fail to become one of Potter’s friends.”

A look of utter defeat was on Draco’s face and he looked up with pleading eyes to the man he had known for far longer than the years he had been a student at Hogwarts.

“You do not have to fear our Lord’s reaction. He ordered us to make sure all children knew not to attack his son in any way. He did not order us to make sure you all become his friends. If you can remain civil, or even just avoid each other, you should be fine in this regard.” The other part was harder and Severus sighed again. How had he come to be in this position again? Emotional blackmail from a meddling Headmaster, and several dumb decisions in his youth. He had to make the best of it.

“I guess Mr. Slytherin informed you of his reasons?”

Draco confirmed with a nod and a low murmured “Yes, sir.”

“I remember quite a few altercations between yourself and our Lord’s heir. And you certainly have a tendency to clash with his friends as well. If you can avoid those, maybe get a real truce, that could be a starting point for a civil relationship.”

Draco sighed and nodded. “Thank you, sir. I fear that will be the only way.” He made a grimace. “But I really do not know if I can be civil to that know-it-all or the red-headed fool.”

Deciding to warn his friend's son of the changes that were about to come to their world, Severus got his basket from the ground again. “You should try to change your perspective on so-called muggle-born wizards and witches. I know of three instances that an ancestry test done at Gringotts proved a magical ancestry for them.”

Severus saw grey-blue eyes widen in surprise.

“You certainly heard about Aiden Nott’s relation to an old German Family, and I know that our Lord’s son and the Dark Lord himself share a common ancestor through the teen’s maternal line.”

Draco collected his basket from the ground and fell into step with Severus.

“The third example I am not in a position to share with you. But these are three out of three, and I guess that there will only be more added.”

Draco thanked his teacher and fell into a contemplative mood for the rest of the time they spent gathering before they turned to get back to their meeting place.

Harry had a great time wandering the woods with Theodore. They had filled their baskets with ferns, moss, and lichen, chatting over different topics from their last runes lesson to the last game of the Quidditch league.

But now they were on their way back to the place the portkey had taken them through the increasing gloom of the forest.
Professor Snape and Malfoy were already there, the professor going through the blond’s collection, showing him where he had made errors in harvesting and demanding that each part was identified. With a satisfied smile, Harry noticed that their Potions Master used the same tone to impart his criticism as he used when talking to Harry about his errors.

Theodore and Harry set their baskets down and waited, watching as Draco’s harvest was inspected, until it was their turn.

Harry was rubbing his arms. It was getting a little chilly here. As this fact made its way through the tired mind of the teenager, Harry looked up, furrowing his brow. The day had been pleasantly warm and it was rather unusual for the temperature to drop quite that rapidly. Was there a thunderstorm approaching?

But that thought did not feel right either. Agitated, the raven-haired teen turned on the spot, peering into different directions, trying to penetrate the ever-growing darkness surrounding them.

“What is the matter, Mr. Slytherin? Are you above paying attention to my lecture?” Professor Snape demanded to know in a scathing tone.

“Do you feel this too, sir? Something is not right here,” Harry said uneasiness clear in his voice, ignoring the reprimand from his teacher.

And for the first time in a long time, an adult actually listened to him. Snape had his wand in hand immediately, looking around and casting a lumos. The others started looking around too, catching on to the nervousness their classmate was practically oozing.

Before they could react or even decide what to do, big dark shapes were descending through the leaves above them. Dark robes were covering them, and the drop in temperature got so severe that their breath steamed, forming little clouds before their faces.

Feeling the despair closing around them, Harry saw Theodore go to the ground beside him. There were more than three Dementors descending on them, maybe five? But in the end it did not matter. Harry held his wand in his hand, not really sure how it got there, searching his mind for a happy memory to use and conjure his Patronus. Concentrating hard as the despair started to creep in from the edges of his mind.

He decided on an afternoon spent with Sirius talking about pranks the Marauders had played, and shouted “Expecto Patronum!” resulting in the silver shape of Prongs breaking from the tip of his wand, rushing at the Dementors, chasing them away.

Only seconds later another silvery shape joined his stag, and Harry's gaze met the wide, dark eyes in the paler-than-usual face of Severus Snape.

Warmth was returning, but with an evening spent answering silly questions still clearly in his mind, Harry bent low to be near the shivering Theodore and got his emergency portkey out of his robes. Gripping the portkey and one of Theodore’s hands firmly in his hand, Harry hissed .:Hospital:. to activate the emergency measure given to him by Voldemort to get to safety.

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After an utterly frustrating afternoon trying to come to an agreement with the goblins, Marvolo was
now hurling curses against Lucius Malfoy, dodging the few that he could not easily shield against.

He had hoped to convince the goblins to let them use the parchment for the ancestry tests outside of Gringotts. He had intended to pay, of course, even had offered to pay more. But no, the goblins had stayed adamant. These tests were only to be made in the presence of a goblin. And that was that.

Casting a rather angry-looking orange hex at the other Lord, one that would cause a nasty itch all over the target’s body, Marvolo snarled in frustration. Now they would have to adopt the children they found before they could determine to which family they might belong. That was a rather unfortunate turn of events. It would have been better if they could have placed the children with actual family.

Chuckling as he batted away a low-powered tentacle curse, Marvolo decided that duelling for practice with his followers was a good way to relieve tension. Not as effective as torturing them, but better than tea.

But maybe he had to get them to duel him in pairs. This was hardly a challenge. Or maybe the man was simply too terrified to actually try. Duelling against Severus might prove more challenging.

Before Marvolo could put the cruciatus curse on Lucius, a silvery, glowing shape entered the duelling room through the wall at the old Black town-house he had made his Death Eater headquarters, striding without pause directly over to the Dark Lord. Wide ruby-red eyes fixated on the doe-shaped patronus. He remembered Severus' memories of Order members sending short messages via patronus and assumed that this was a message from his Potions Master. A cold feeling of dread settled in his stomach. Why would the man decide to send such a message to him?

As a second patronus entered the room, trotting over to the wide-eyed blond Lord, the unpleasant feeling only increased.

“We were attacked by Dementors. All boys are mostly unharmed. We are at St. Mungo's.” Severus’ impassive voice told him before the patronus vanished after it had finished its mission.

Red and blue eyes met across the room. “Go home, change, and fetch your wife. We will see us at the hospital.” Not waiting for a reaction from the other man, Marvolo spun on the spot, apparating through his own wards, to the reception room of Griffin House, calling for his elf. “Henbane!”

The elf popped into the room, bowed, and waited for his orders.

“Get me a fresh set of robes!” Marvolo already started getting out of his tight-fitting duelling robes that were scorched in some places, covered with some slime, and stained with sweat. He cast a freshening charm on himself, getting rid of the evidence of the past two hours.

He had just finished as Henbane popped back in, placing a set of green linen robes on a love-seat and vanishing again, taking the dirty robes with him.

Not wanting to lose more time, since his heir was maybe injured and in danger – why would Dementors be in the Forest of Dean? – Marvolo apparated directly into the entrance hall of the best wizarding hospital Britain had to offer.

oooOOooo
Healer-in-training Augustus Pye had been up since the early hours of the day and quite happy that the end of his shift was drawing near. He hoped for a quiet end to the shift, so he could drink another cup of the awful coffee in the staff room and read the latest issue of *Healing Today*.

As the alarm started in the staff room, Augustus knew it was not to happen.

Sighing he got up and abandoned his cup to get cold as he rushed to the reception area. Someone had arrived by emergency portkey. Those usually were hard cases. Potions Masters working in research and regularly having accidents, those working with the dangerous plants or animals – those were his favourites, always something new to learn – and chronically ill patients that had a portkey for when their condition became worse.

As he reached the arrival zone only seconds later, he spotted two bodies hunched on the floor, teenagers probably, and added rich and paranoid lords and their heirs to the list. Judging by the green flashing light over the two, at least one private healer had been informed. Splendid, he hated working with those entitled bastards.

He was just crouching down beside the pale boys with dark hair, as a crack of apparation sounded beside him and another two bodies made their appearance.

An adult and a child this time.

He started to work at assessing the reason they had come here in this fashion.

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Severus sat on a padded exam table eating his last piece of chocolate, watching over his three charges sitting on hospital beds eating their own chocolate bars, looking a little less pale than when they had arrived here.

Greengrass was standing off to the side with the healers from St. Mungo’s speaking about the documentation of the after-effects of the run-in with the Dementors.

It had been ten minutes since Severus had cast the Patronus charm three times to inform the fathers of the three boys. He had done so in full view of the hospital staff to make sure that there was no doubt over how the parents had been informed. No need to stir rumours about the continued existence of the Death Eaters. It had not been common knowledge, but enough aurors had known that the Dark Mark could be used to call the Dark Lord.

Now there was no doubt he had used one of the few truly light spells to deliver the message.

The Dark Lord was the first of the fathers to arrive. The man stormed into the small curtained space, only stopping briefly to orientate himself before hurrying to his son’s side.

Severus watched as the boy raised his head and looked at the worried face of Lord Slytherin. Watched as surprise briefly flashed in those green eyes.

Knowing that a report from him was required, Severus got up from his resting place and walked over past the other two beds.

“Are you well?” Severus heard his Lord ask of his heir. He quickly repressed his urge to raise a
surprised brow, there was true worry in that voice. Even with all that he had seen since the Dark Lord’s return to sanity, he would never have thought that the man was capable of true worry for another being. But maybe it was the worry over the prospect of losing his heir and therefore his claim to the Lordship, and not true concern for Lily’s son.

Either way, it was more concern and caring than the boy had experienced up till now.

“I am. But I wonder what they were doing there.”

“Eat your chocolate while I speak with your teacher.”

Meeting the blue eyes – the glamour the Dark Lord wore when he was in public – Severus felt the probe against his shields. The probe was light, almost gentle, not at all like he had learned to expect before his Lord’s fall. He lowered his defences and projected a picture of him bowing low, his robes pooling on the floor, for his Lord to see.

“What happened, Master Snape?”

So now he had to play the role of private tutor and potions supplier of the Slytherin family. What was another role to add to his mix?

“As we gathered again to assess the harvest, it was getting dark, the temperature suddenly plummeted. It was getting darker, but there was nothing to see until Dementors dropped through the canopy. Your son cast a Patronus charm moments before me, and then we came here.” His report was short and to the point. He managed to keep the horror at being near the happiness-sucking monsters out of his voice. But only barely. The memory of kneeling on the floor of his room at Spinner’s End, rocking back and forth, clutching the newspaper to his chest, grieving for Lily, was still too raw for his comfort.

The mortification that the Dark Lord had seen a glimpse of that last thought was quickly pushed aside, and the Potions Master concentrated on the surroundings. He felt responsible for shielding and protecting Henry Slytherin, and so he would. Not to mention that he was compelled to do so by his vow.

Lucius and Narcissa were the next to reach the hospital, rushing over to their little darling, enveloping him in their arms. Severus was a little surprised. They never displayed their feelings this openly in public. But maybe the news that their child had been in danger of getting his soul sucked out by a Dementor would change the rules.

“Thank you for keeping our son safe, Severus,” was all the acknowledgement he got from the blond Lord and his Lady, but he was happy with what he got, he considered them his friends, after all.

As Benjamin Nott arrived as the last one, his younger son Aidan in tow, Severus rose and discharged himself from the hospital against the healer’s advice.

Another brief eye contact, and the Potions Master had a new task: Checking if the Order of the Phoenix had had something to do with the attack.
Pleased with Severus, who had ordered the healers to record their findings on all three boys, Marvolo was working on plans to discover who might have set Dementors on his son and how to prevent further attempts on the boy’s life.

He was thinking furiously, but at the moment plotting had to take a back seat, he had a child to attend to. It was simply not an option to behave the same way as those blasted Muggles or that old goat of a headmaster.

“Why did you not use your portkey the moment you knew there was something wrong?” Marvolo was a little proud for keeping his question free of accusation. He wanted to know what had happened and why Henry had taken the actions he had, not assume and place blame right from the start.

“Casting the Patronus is almost instinctive by now,” shrugged the boy, a smudge of chocolate in the corner of his mouth. “The moment I realized what the problem was, I just cast. Once the despair was gone, I remembered the portkey and used it to bring myself and Theodore here.” Henry spoke quietly, looking down at his hands, which were twisting in the boy’s lap, tugging at the hems of his sleeves.

Realizing that the child was nervous, Marvolo patted his son’s leg lightly. “You did well. All of you came back safe and in one piece, and that is the most important thing.”

Startled green eyes met calm blue ones. It felt as if he was gaining ground with the boy, his son, his heir. It proved to be easier than he had anticipated. At least up till now. Once the children were back at the school his influence would be lesser, and Henry would spend much more time with people firmly in the headmaster’s pocket. The progress would probably slow down then.

“Let me speak with the healer. He might release you into the care of Healer Greengrass, so you can return home.” A shaky nod and smile were his response, but he could clearly see that they were a mask.

Marvolo grimaced in the privacy of his mind. He was quite sure that the chance was high that he was starring in the memories Henry had to endure in the presence of Dementors. Maybe he should work on starring in some of the memories able to conjure a patronus, as well?

It was not easy to get the healers of St. Mungo’s to release their teenage patients into the care of their parents, even when a private healer would care for them, and they were deep into a debate, three Lords of the Wizengamot talking at the two healers, as a house-elf popped into the room.

It held out a letter to Marvolo, bobbing a curtsey. “An express owl from Ministry brought letter for Master, sir.”

Wondering whether the incompetent fools at the Auror Office had managed to find the culprit already – attacks from Dementors had to be reported on the spot, and so the hospital had already informed the authorities – Marvolo opened the letter and started to read, ignoring the silent stares of the others standing around him.

He snarled in surprise as he read the first few words of the letter. ‘Warning for performance of underage magic…’ that could not be real. Why had he had such problems overtaking the Ministry the last time he tried? The incompetence was appalling. And the resulting inconveniences were annoying.
Later the same day, Harry sat at his desk in his room. A cup of hot chocolate standing by his side, he filled out a kind of form the house-elves had given to him. They insisted that he decide what would be served at his birthday party. Another similar one from Sirius sat, already finished, at the side of the desk.

He would have two parties this year. A thought that felt alien to him.

On his birthday there would be a party at the Manor, or more precisely, in the gardens around it. The invitations had gone out a few days before. All allies, and those that could maybe become allies, were invited. Well, not all. Only those that had children around Harry’s own age. So he would be surrounded by mostly Slytherins, a few Ravenclaws, one or two Hufflepuffs, and Neville. As the ward of his regent, it was obligatory that he and his grandmother be invited.

Harry dreaded the whole thing, even if he felt a little flattered and excited and ashamed at the prospect of getting a real, big birthday party. He didn’t really know what he should feel. Someone other than the Weasleys was throwing him a party, two someones in fact, as Sirius was throwing him a party as well. On the day after his birthday, but he got to invite all the people he wanted to invite.

This day had started so nice. And the trip to the forest had been nice as well. Talking with Theodore, wandering through the green all around, and gathering ingredients.

Draco’s entitlement had only been a small blemish on the day, his relief at getting some of the frustration off his chest by telling the little prat what he thought of him.

Really, the nerve of the blond. Harry was starting to wonder if the Slytherin had any real friends at all. If he had not been so angry, he might have felt pity for the other.

But the attacks by the Dementors had been the worst. Who would, could, send Dementors after him? Who had known that they would be there? And then the cold dread had brought his worst memory back to the surface. He had cast the Patronus before he had to experience it again. But as he got to see Voldemort at the hospital, with that odd look on his face, it had brought everything back. That was the man who had tried to kill him. Who had killed his parents. And today he had stood at his bedside, worried over his well-being, patting his knee, trying to comfort him.

His confusion only got worse. He had hoped that it would get easier, but now he guessed it never would. He needed to find another way to deal with it all, ignoring the elephant in the room was not going to work much longer.

Marking vanilla ice cream with strawberries and chocolate muffins as the choices for dessert, Harry finished the list for the elves, setting it to the side.

Sighing, he got up and gathered the list and letter for Sirius. He would walk up to the owlery to send the letter tonight.

The time until he could get back to Hogwarts could not pass fast enough. Why was it always him?
In the dark, crickets making the only sound in the warm air, a white-haired man in dark blue robes covered with tiny fluttering hummingbirds, stood on a path looking at a shack that was starting to crumble.

It was an unassuming place, utterly unremarkable. But only for those that were not sensitive to magic.

For him the area was saturated with spells and wards. Mostly to prevent Muggles from coming near but also some geared to prevent magicals from entering the property. There were some nastier wards farther in. All in all, it would cost Albus quite some time to get through it all if he wanted to prevent the intrusion from being noticed.

And he wanted to stay unnoticed.

Allowing himself a small victorious smile, Albus apparated back to Hogwarts. He had found the old shack that had been the place Tom’s mother had grown up and met Tom Riddle senior. Albus had suspected that one of the horcruxes was hidden there, and now he was happy to have discovered that he had been right. All these wards were not placed there for nothing.

Thinking about when he would find the time to break those wards and get to the soul piece in its container, the headmaster walked leisurely over the grounds up to the school.

And if he could find a new teacher for the post of Defence professor, this day would be perfect.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Thanks to the Dreamless Sleep Healer Greengrass had made him take the evening before, Harry had slept long and deep. The sun had awoken him, and after a long hot shower, he now was on the way down to the kitchen and breakfast.

Just as he reached the end of the stairs, he heard the voices of two men coming from the study and altered his course to see what that was about.

“This is ridiculous, Cornelius,” Harry heard Voldemort say, clearly irritated.

“But you can’t dispute that the trace activated. The boy did cast a Patronus charm in the middle of a forest frequented by Muggles,” the whiny voice of Minister Fudge answered.

Harry silently crept closer, keeping to the wall. This was about the attack yesterday and he wanted – no, needed – to know what was going on.

“I do not dispute this. But I have proof from the healers at St. Mungo’s that Henry and the others were exposed to Dementors.”

A heavy silence filled the next moments, and Harry tried to move even more silently while he found a place in the hall not easily seen from the study, but with a good view of the hall.

“It is outrageous to claim such a thing!”

Harry felt rage grow inside him at the spluttering denial of the Minister of Magic. There had been Dementors, they had been attacked. How could the Minister claim that he was lying, that they all were lying? Even if he had not said it in that many words, he had implied that it was impossible for Dementors to have been there.

“Even if three teenagers and one Potions Master had erred and imagined the presence of Dementors in the Forest of Dean – And I maintain the claim that there indeed were Dementors present – The Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery clearly states some conditions under which it is perfectly acceptable for an underage wizard to perform magic.”

Harry wished he could see the faces of the two wizards speaking with each other. With all his confusion over Voldemort and his motives, it would be really helpful to know what the man thought about the happenings of yesterday afternoon.

“Well,” Fudge sounded really unhappy with the whole situation, “there are those that think the boy is only doing such things to get attention. I’m not one of them,” the Minister suddenly added in a frantic tone, and Harry thought that Voldemort must have send one of his glares at the man, “but I have to work with them. It is not so easy… Oh, don't look at me this way.”

Harry heard steps on wooden floor, like someone was pacing.

Voldemort sighed. “I’m pretty sure that the Dementors are still under Ministry control. Am I right?”

There was no answer to hear, so the eavesdropping teenager assumed that the Minister had nodded.
in response.

“Then someone must have sent them to the Forest. So there has to be a paper trail. If we can locate it, you could find the person willing to use Dementors against children, Cornelius.” A hand slapped against a wooden surface, a table probably. “Children!”

A deep breath was to hear.

“There were three heirs at risk yesterday afternoon. And they all tell the same story. Believing yourself to be in a life-threatening situation is enough to be allowed to cast defensive magic. There is nothing more defensive than a Patronus, Cornelius. Whoever is putting so much pressure on you, they have nothing to base it on.”

The pacing picked up speed, and the Minister muttered something under his breath, too low for Harry to understand from his hiding place out in the hall.

“I know that you need to secure your position. Especially after you helped me, Cornelius. But dragging Henry to a hearing for underage magic in such an obvious case of justified use of magic will not do this.”

Voldemort was speaking with some determination, a quiet intensity. Harry felt odd. Why? Why was he doing this? Harry was tired of being confused all the time.

“But going against someone abusing their power... that can get you some influence and respect.”

Harry realized that Voldemort was trying to influence the Minister to do what he wanted. And at the moment, that seemed to be leaving Harry alone and going after the person that had set Dementors on him or the others.

A reluctant Cornelius Fudge answered, “You probably are right, Marvolo. Lucius’ and Benjamin’s sons were attacked too. Those in opposition to you – I’m sorry to say, but there are quite a few that can’t let the past rest – can’t possibly say something about me trying to help their fathers. Yes, I think I can work with that.”

With another sigh – Harry was sure it was only uttered for show and effect – Voldemort stood from his chair, judging by the sound of chair legs on carpet. “If I can be of any help, let me know. And you need not try to shield me from those that are still angry. I still remember. I’m not that monster any more, but the past cannot be undone. I only can try to make amends and work for a better future.”

Harry listened as the two wizards exchanged farewells, contemplating what he had overheard. After Voldemort had made the unbreakable vow he should have known that the man would not kill him, but seeing was more convincing than simply being told. And it really seemed that the man wanted the best for Harry, the evidence was piling up. Could he accept it? The desire to care that showed with growing clarity from Voldemort... somehow it felt wrong.

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Marvolo felt Henry come close enough to the study to listen to his meeting with the Minister. He had added proximity wards to the study a few days ago. As the attractive young wizard was of the opinion that his son had the right to know what the Ministry had tried to do with the warning for
underage magic, and was sure that Fudge would transform into a clam and disappear if he should learn of Henry’s presence, he kept silent.

A few moments later he escorted the Minister back to the Floo and watched him vanish in the green flames. The man’s tendency to bowler hats in eye-watering colours was something he probably would never understand.

Meeting Henry in the hall on the way to the kitchen, he smiled at the teen wearing a light blue robe over black trousers and a dark blue shirt. It seemed as if the sleeves and the trouser legs were getting a little short.

“We will need to get you some more clothes. Those are getting too short.”

They fell into step, walking to the kitchen, Henry obviously trying to decide if he wanted to comment on what he had heard.

“If I did not want you to hear, I could have met the Minister at his office, or I could have put up a silencing ward.” Marvolo allowed a small smile to curl his lips at the small gasp from the teen beside him. “Do you have questions, Henry?”

“No, sir. Or maybe…”

“Ask, Henry. As I have said before, you can ask. I’m not promising that I will answer all your questions, but I will not lie.”

“Why were we attacked? And am I in trouble?”

“You are not in trouble, Henry. You were totally right to cast the Patronus charm. There were no Muggles present, and everyone has the right to protect himself from Dementors,” Marvolo started to reassure his son about the whole underage magic situation. The boy needed the assurance that someone was on his side, he had been left to deal with such problems alone much too often.

The other question was just as pressing, but not as easily answered. “And I have many enemies. Many of them are in the Ministry or have connections there. Any of them could have sent Dementors after one of my known followers and the heirs of three known conservative, or dark, families. You remember what I told you at that first day?”

Henry nodded, and they entered the kitchen.

“There are many that would wish you, or Theodore, or Draco harm. Carry your wand and the portkey everywhere, and do not hesitate to cast whatever comes to mind to buy the time you need to use the portkey to get away. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir,” was the quiet answer from his son.

They settled down at the table, each with his favourite breakfast being placed before them. Fried eggs, toast, bacon, and an apple for Henry, porridge with cream, raisins, and honey for himself.

They split the newspaper and Henry started to look at his letters. The boy still got a large number of letters every day. From the different Weasley children, the young witch from Xerxes’ family, and a few others.

Today one of them looked much like an invitation. But Marvolo restrained his curiosity, snooping about in his son’s mail was not a move that would be conducive to his goal of gaining the child’s trust. The wards he had in place around the house, in addition to those that had been here in the first
place, made sure nothing dangerous could get in.

“Sir?”

Marvolo looked up from the article reporting about a small theatre starting near Diagon Alley, to look over to his son.

“Neville… Heir Longbottom has sent me an invitation to his birthday. May I go?”

There was hope and a little resentment at being forced to ask for permission in the deep green eyes. Marvolo vividly remembered those eyes full of defiance, on several occasions. In the face of Lily Potter the night she died, in the face of an eleven-year-old Henry fighting back over the Philosopher’s stone, and again in the graveyard only a few weeks prior.

“Do you want to go?” He did not really have any objections, and encouraging connections and interactions with known light families would throw the old meddler a little off the trail, keeping him distracted. Granting a wish to Henry had the added benefit of casting a positive light on himself, something he really could use now and then.

“Yes, I do, sir.”

“Then you will go. What do you want to give him as a gift? As we are speaking of this, what do you want for your birthday?”

And moments later they were deep in birthday celebration preparations. Henry was a little flustered by the idea that all of Marvolo’s people – the man avoided calling them that outright, or using the correct term of “followers” or “Death Eaters” in front of his son, even though both of them knew that this was what they were – would want to get him some kind of gift. And as the teenager did not know what to wish for, they delayed that decision for another day.

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Severus walked up to the Order’s headquarters, late and not caring one bit. Yesterday, after he had informed the Headmaster of the attack on his students, a meeting of the Order had been scheduled for the next morning. He had been glad, as it had given him the time for a long hot bath and several cups of hot chocolate. Now the horror of encountering the Dementors and all the bad memories they had stirred up from the depths of his mind had receded, and he was calm again.

The Potions Master reflected about what the goal of this day was, and wondered again at how much everything had changed.

He stepped through the door and heard the muffled voices of the others from down the corridor. Seemed he was the last to arrive. But that was what he had expected, as he had decided to make a short detour and stop at the graves of Lily and James Potter.

Severus had hoped going there, for the first time, would help him come to a decision regarding the memory the Dark Lord had given him. It had not. He still did not know if he would be better off viewing it, or not viewing it.

Locking these thoughts away behind his shields, Severus reached for the doorknob and twisted it to gain entry into the meeting room they had used the last few times. Upon his entering the room, all
quiet conversations died quickly, and all eyes locked on him. There were a few new faces in the
crowd around the table, and all the old faces were there as well.

“Severus, my boy! I feared that you might not be able to come. How are you?” an overly
concerned-looking Albus asked from his place at the head of the table, gesturing for him to take
the last open seat between Miss Tonks and someone Severus assumed was another auror.

So Severus walked around the table, getting a good look at all the people present. Augusta
Longbottom was there, the older Weasleys, Mad Eye, with his eyes – both of them – following the
Potions Master on his way, Mundungus, and even the werewolf was there. Thankfully, though, the
mutt was missing.

“I am well enough, Headmaster. I just took the time I needed to counter the effects of close
proximity to five Dementors.”

Miss Tonks turned to him as he sat down, her hair changing colours from a vibrant hot-pink to a
sickly-looking green, eagerly asking, “The rumours are true then?”

Rolling his eyes – how was it that everyone he had to work with was so infuriating? – Severus sat
and glared at the young woman. “What rumours are you talking about?”

“That Harry cast a full corporeal patronus in front of several muggles, because some deer startled
him.” Her hair circled back to a more vibrant shade – an almost neon green – and she added,
shifting her head from side to side. “But there are several variants circling around the department.
So is it true?”

Leaning back from the much-too-eager young witch, Severus sneered but was prevented from
answering on the spot because Molly Weasley made her concerns known.

“The poor dear! First that blasted adoption, and now even more commotion.” Her red locks were
quivering as she wrung her hands in front of her and she only calmed slightly as her husband laid a
hand on her arm, squeezing in reassurance.

Ignoring the murmurs around him, the inquisitive gazes from the other Order members, Severus
turned his eyes to Dumbledore and started his recount, a more thorough one than the one he had
given yesterday. “Lucius talked me into giving this lesson for his son and two others. He made the
invitations at the last Wizengamot meeting. At least, that was the plan he told me about.” A glass
with water was placed before him by Molly in her usual mothering way that no one was safe from.

“Whoever sent those Dementors probably got our location from the portkey office. As I did not
want to apparate with more than two passengers, I insisted that Lucius would get one.”

“Should be easy enough asking who wanted to see those forms,” Moody drawled, and those
working in one of the various Ministry departments nodded in agreement.

“And they intended to kill all of us. They could not have known that Potter is capable of casting a
full corporeal Patronus, and the superstition that dark wizards are unable to produce one is widely
believed.” The Potions Master sneered over calling himself a dark wizard and dared the others to
protest that they did not think of him as such, but no one took the bait.

It was not easy this far away from the Headmaster, but Severus was reasonably sure the man was
trying to ascertain if he could use this in some way to gain something. The Potions Master felt
disbelief spreading in his guts. The worry he saw in the faces around him... most were not really
worried about the children that had been in danger yesterday, they worried over other things. Many
were contemplating other concerns.

“Who kept it from the paper?” Kingsley wanted to know. And a small side discussion started that was quickly squashed by the Headmaster.

“How did Tom react to the attack?” asked the Headmaster and leader of the Order before the meeting could take off on another tangent.

“He came to the hospital as soon as I informed him. He showed concern and care, as I would expect from any parent,” Severus relayed his observation. Unbelieving faces and a few snorts answered, and the dark-eyed man could not resist rolling his eyes. What did they believe the Dark Lord would do in a public place, such as the wizarding hospital?

“He always was a good actor,” Albus mused, and his blue eyes fixed on the form of his spy. “Could you learn more of his plans? Severus? Remus? Augusta? You all were in contact with him. What is Voldemort doing?”

The three named exchanged glances, and Augusta Longbottom, as the eldest, started to speak. “We talked about times the boy and I can meet, so as to speak about how I will vote as his proxy and so forth. I got the feeling that he wants to give the boy the opportunity to form his own opinions. It did not feel like he was trying to force the votes of the Potter seat into a certain direction. I think only time will tell. It was certainly a surprise that I was asked to be regent.”

Severus was impressed by the quiet dignity the older woman showed and noted that all present were equally baffled by this decision of the Dark Lord. Being a spy for the Dark Lord in earnest for the first time felt odd, but gratifying. It was easier to gather intelligence, now that he was no longer forced to find only harmless tidbits of information to tell him while appearing to provide valuable information.

Remus picked up with his own report next. “I only get to interact with him in the capacity as Harry's tutor. He certainly is placing quite a focus on Harry's education, but despite this... I do not see them interact often.” The werewolf shrugged apologetically, offering a small smile. “I know from Sirius that they see each other several times a week, so he is not trying to isolate Harry.”

To Severus' interest, that got a small frown from Albus, and not the twinkle he had anticipated. It seemed the rift between the mutt and the Headmaster was deeper than he had thought. Taking a sip from his water – after testing it for potions and poison, to the obvious amusement of Alastor Moody and the indignation of Mrs. Weasley – Severus started in on his report. He was glad he had asked the Dark Lord for the information he was allowed to relay. The list he had gotten was quite extensive.

“At the moment there has been quite some time spent on planning the boy's education. Beside history, potions, and runes, there are lessons on politics, manners, and dancing. And I'm sure all of his teachers will appreciate the lessons in penmanship.” At first Severus had been a little surprised that his Lord had given him permission to speak about the brat's education, but as the boy obviously was able to speak about it himself, there was no harm done if Severus spoke of it. And so he always started with this topic and laid emphasis on it.

By now he noticed that the Headmaster's patience was wearing thinner and thinner with every meeting on this topic, leaving only the conclusion that Albus did not really care about what Potter was learning. Severus started to wonder if the old wizard would manage to stay outwardly calm should his spy start talking about an education in the Dark Arts for the boy the Order was pinning all its hopes on.
As he left the safe ground of education, the spy sharpened his senses for all reactions. After all, his Lord wanted to know what the Order made of his actions.

“There is a big celebration planned for Potter's birthday, and the Dark Lord is spending a lot of time on ordering the Potter and Slytherin estates. Several of the times that I met with him in the study at Griffin House, the papers before him pertained to this.” Still not what the Headmaster wanted to hear, if Severus was to judge by the man's expression. “There have not been any big meetings of Death Eaters recently. But I have been asked about my progress whenever I have been there to give lessons to Potter. I'm still working on potions pertaining to procreation, after I finished one to help with traumatic experiences. It does not seem that there will be any openly aggressive actions in the near future.”

A flash of disappointment seemed to make its way through the old blue eyes. And not for the first time, Severus wondered what they were expecting the Dark Lord to do. His actions so far made it quite clear that he was aiming for a more peaceful approach.

“And my most recent mission is to determine if the Order had anything to do with the attack. My answer to this will obviously be a no.” Severus concluded his report, leaning back in his chair weaving his fingers together, returning to his role of watcher.

During the next hour the Order distributed missions among themselves, mostly they were still searching for precedence for removing minors from their guardians' care, and now, subtle research into who had sent the Dementors was added to the list.

Severus paid rapt attention and made sure to have more than one good look at the new faces at the table, so he could share them with his Lord later. Hopefully the meeting would not go on for much longer, he had had a rather important step in his experimentation for the “Two-Fathers-Potion” – his working title – before him, and would rather be working on this then sitting and listening to Gryffindor scheming and planning. It just lacked a certain finesse.

ooooo

After the meeting of the Order of the Phoenix – the first he had been invited to – was finished, Proudfoot stood by his younger colleague Tonks. He was happy that he had gotten the opportunity to do something about the evil wizard who had managed to just waltz back into society. He was a little ashamed that he had at first doubted the Headmaster and Harry Potter when they had claimed that You-Know-Who had returned in the aftermath of the third task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. But now he was a member of the very organization that had stood against evil in the last war and would stand against evil now.

There was just one thing he needed to ask. “Say, Tonks, that Snape fellow, is he really a spy? I remember that there were rumours of him being a Death Eater back then. And the way he speaks...” he let his sentence trail off in the hope that Tonks – he once had made the mistake of calling her Nymphadora, he never would do that again – would get what he wanted to know without the need for him to actually voice it.

An understanding look came to the face that so often changed form. She mostly had the same base features and just changed small things, mostly the length and colour of her hair, and she placed a reassuring hand on his arm. “He was a spy back then and is a spy now. He's really good at what he's doing, even if he is a snarky bastard. Be happy that he only started teaching at Hogwarts after
you had finished there. I needed to take my NEWT for potions at the Ministry because I couldn't
learn what I needed in his classes... he is not a good teacher. I heard that he only returned to the
Death Eaters this time because Dumbledore asked him to.” That last bit was added in a
conspiratorial whisper, and the older Auror felt better. He knew a dark wizard when he saw one,
but it probably was impossible for a light wizard to be a spy in the Death Eaters.

They left together, speaking about the newest office gossip, leaving the uncomfortable questions of
who had tried to murder three teenagers behind.

In his most muggle clothes, Harry was standing in a nice room somewhere in Muggle London. He
did not really know where, as Voldemort had apparated them to a small courtyard and walked with
him here.

Today he was to meet the Mind Healer his guardian had found for him. Harry had mixed feelings
about this, as he had about so much since he had been dragged to the Ministry and been adopted. A
small part of him hoped that the woman he was to meet today would be able to help him bring a
little order to his thoughts and feelings. But a much larger part feared that she would call him a
freak as the Dursleys had done.

The teen tried to dry his sweaty palms on his jeans without being too obvious. He just knew that
such behaviour would get him a displeased look from the dark-haired man standing at his side.

It was bizarre that Voldemort, the man known to hate all things Muggle, was standing here in a suit
in the waiting room of a psychologist waiting for the call to come in. Harry hoped with all his
might that the man would not come in with him. That would just be too mortifying.

“Henry, just remember; I want you to give her a chance to help you. If you do not think that it helps
you, just tell me and I will stop bringing you here.”

Before Harry could formulate an answer to that statement, which had been repeated more than once
up to this point, the door to the doctor's office opened and a woman build like a square, in
professional looking clothes, took in their appearance. “Lord Slytherin and Henry, am I right?” she
asked in a nice-sounding voice. Harry only nodded and followed her over to the door as Voldemort
started to walk over.

The adult wizard stopped short as the woman held a stack of papers for him to take out in his
direction.

“The secrecy contract you required. Please come back in an hour, Lord Slytherin. Talks between
patient and doctor are private.”

She sounded so sure of herself, and Harry held his breath, waiting for Voldemort to lose his
patience, get his wand from the holster he knew was hidden in the sleeve of the dark suit jacket,
and curse the squib.

But the moment went by without the grisly visions in Harry's mind becoming reality. A head
covered in dark wavy hair was inclined in a polite nod and the papers taken. “I will be back in an
hour then,” Voldemort agreed and, turning to Harry, he added in quiet hisses .:If you feel unwell
or threatened, use your portkey. Do not run out onto the street. Do you understand?:.

Nodding, unable to speak at the moment because he felt as if some huge frog was stuck in his throat, Harry followed the older woman into her office and heard the door close behind him.

Trying to calm down, Harry started on one of the breathing exercises Snape had him practice for Occlumency training and let his gaze wander through the room.

The furniture was nicely modern and from a light wood. Cushions and rugs were in different shades of sunny yellow colours, making the whole room into a cheerful and calm place. As green eyes met the green eyes of a lazily blinking cat-like creature lazing in a spot of sunshine, Harry felt himself getting calmer.

“This lazy fellow over there is Tom. My kneazle. He helps me with the more skittish patients. Don’t you?” she bent down to the feline slinking over to her to get his head scratched, arching his back and starting to purr as she complied.

Realizing that this tomcat shared a name with the man that now was known by the name of Lord Voldemort, Harry started to laugh. At the questioning gaze from the silver-blonde-haired woman, the teen sat down in one of the comfortable seats standing around the room and started on the tale of the shared names. He was much calmer after that and got into a comfortable conversation with Mrs. Goyle.

As he was fetched after the hour was over, they made several appointments for the time until school would start again. How they would proceed after that they would have to see, but Harry had hopes that she would be able to help him.

Carisma started a new file after her newest patient had left with the man her nephew was bound to. She was most curious if she would manage to get the man to agree to start therapy of his own. She just knew that he needed help. But equally certain was that you could not force anyone to start therapy who did not want to. And in some cases, such as this one, trying to do so could get the trouble really started.

So for the moment she concentrated on the young boy the Dark Lord had brought to her for help. Harry was a nice boy, cheerful and polite on the surface with carefully hidden depths and wounds under the mask he was wearing.

She only got glimpses during the one hour they had sat in her office, chatting and petting Tom, who kept changing between sitting with one or the other. Almost as if he were sampling their abilities and trying to decide who made the better place to sleep.

At the moment Harry, as he insisted she call him, needed help to cope with his current circumstances: Living with the man that had killed his parents but who had promised not to kill him. She quickly had realized that the images Harry had of the man, both from before he had been adopted and after he had started living with the man, did not match in any way. After some careful questions, she learned that he did not even look the same.

So she suggested that the teenager find two different names for the seemingly different persons, so he could keep what he knew better separated and could compare easier. Because, she reasoned, it
was entirely possible that the man had changed as much as it did appear.

Harry had thought about this idea and agreed that it might help him. After all, neither of them could disprove the claim that he had been affected by a curse that had been lifted, as his previous body had been destroyed.

Carisma was happy that she had kept in contact with the wizarding world, even after she had left to find her calling in the Muggle world. If she had not, she might not have been able even to try to help this remarkable young man.

Shortly before they expected Lord Slytherin to be back, Harry had told her that he wasn't sure that he would be able to talk about the things that were causing him problems, and she had promised to offer him different ways to express his feelings. She was thinking about getting him to express what was troubling him with art. She was going to get some clay and paint, unsure if he would prefer painting or sculpting.

All in all, it had been a promising start. There were years of work before them, but she was confident that she could help him work on his problems.

oooOOooo

Clutching the book wrapped in fine silk to his chest, Harry stopped spinning and stepped out of the Floo in Longbottom Manor. It was the afternoon of Neville's birthday, and Harry had just made his way here to celebrate it.

A beaming Neville, in nice robes in earthen tones, stood in front of the Floo in the reception room and stepped forward to greet his friend.

Stumbling a little through the still unfamiliar words of the formal greeting, Harry bowed and offered the present he had brought to the other boy. “I hope you like it. We went yesterday to find it,” Harry added by way of explanation.

And in fact he and Marvolo – the name he had decided to use in his mind for the after version of his guardian – had been to Diagon Alley yesterday, or, more accurately, Knockturn Alley. The older wizard had placed strong charms on them to change their appearances, and they had strolled from shop to shop. Harry had not known how many little shops selling second-hand goods there were in the dingy street. Marvolo had cautioned Harry not to touch anything before he had checked it for curses and similar dangers. And the teenager had complied.

Harry was almost sure that some of the shop owners had recognized the man, by the way they had acted once they were inside. But Marvolo had ignored them, only asking for books about plants, as that was what Harry wanted to get for Neville.

Originally he had wanted to go to Flourish and Blotts, but Marvolo had suggested getting a one-of-a-kind book. Like a personal research journal or something of that kind, and so they had ended up in the street the Weasley children were forbidden ever to enter.

Seeing the beaming smile getting ever bigger on Neville's face, Harry was glad he had accepted the idea.

“Oh, that is wonderful, Harry!” exclaimed the portly Gryffindor. “This is a journal on experimental
breeding of magical plants. Where did you find this?"

Smiling at his eager friend, Harry shrugged. “We went through some second-hand shops, I thought something like this was more interesting, and I didn't really know what books you already own.”

After that the afternoon went as Harry had thought it would. They had tea and cake with Neville's gran and some old distant relatives. The infamous uncle Algie was one of them. It was rather stuffy, and neither boy felt entirely comfortable sitting at the table, listening to talk about aching joints and the best charms to clean shoes.

Thankfully, soon enough they were allowed to excuse themselves, and Neville led Harry out to the greenhouses to show him his plants.

Wandering from one patch of bright flowering plants to the other, Harry watched his friend gathering the courage to ask him something.

“You really did not know that you were the heir to the Potter family?” he finally asked, continuing the conversation they had started at the Malfoy's summer party.

“I didn't even know that magic is real, or how my parents died. I knew nothing before I got my Hogwarts letter. And even then I wasn't told that I would have to learn so much to become Lord Potter once I was of age.” Harry had to snort in the face of the astonished and wide-eyed stare from the other boy.

“But why?” was the dumbfounded question Neville got out after several tries.

Walking the few steps over to a bench and sitting down, Harry thought about what he wanted to tell the other. He was in a similar position as Harry's, without parents to care for him, heir to a family... out of all those in his year, Neville was the one closest to him in the things he had experienced.

“I'm not sure. Most of this is guesswork,” Harry started and got a little nod from Neville, who sat beside him on the bench, waving away a vein away that tried to wind around his shoulder. “Before I turned eleven, I think Dumbledore had promised my aunt and uncle minimal contact with wizards. And he claimed he wanted to give me a childhood out of the limelight.” Picking at some flaking paint, Harry added slowly, “I kind of understand that.”

“Yeah, being hounded by reporters can't be fun,” Neville agreed.

“But why I got no lessons after I started Hogwarts... on weekends or something like that? Maybe in all the holidays I stayed in the castle... I have no idea what the Headmaster was thinking. And I'm not sure if he even would tell me if I asked.”

“And now?” Neville asked cautiously, clearly curious, but not wanting to set his friend off.

“Now? Now, I have lessons around the clock. Or at least that's the way it feels. He was really surprised there hadn't been any lessons before. Not even duelling. I think that made him pause the most. After all, he thought the Headmaster would think me the best bet to defeat him for good.” Harry shrugged and shifted the topic from him over to Neville's own lessons.

The rest of the afternoon they were sitting in the greenhouse talking about some of the more embarrassing lessons in dancing and manners Neville had had, Harry talking about his penmanship lessons from Theodore and the one disastrous lesson from the elderly witch and the way Marvolo had chastened her before he made her leave.

In the evening Harry left by Floo, happy in the knowledge that he would not lose this friendship,
even with the Lord of Slytherin as his adoptive father. He felt lighter.

But in the back of his mind, there was the question wandering around, whether Dumbledore knew or suspected that he was a horcrux and had planned to kill him at some point, and therefore had not seen any use in educating him. It was not a comfortable thought, not at all.

oooOOooo

The next morning was Harry's own birthday.

After waking when the sun had wandered around enough to shine into his eyes, Harry lay on his back looking up to the ceiling, contemplating what had changed in the few weeks he was now staying with Marvolo.

He came to no conclusion and finally got out of bed, donning the robes Flimm had placed on a chair for him. They were light and casual. Harry still felt all dressed up, if he wore clothes that were called “casual” by the elves and Marvolo, but he had nothing different, so he just did as he was told.

Taking a deep breath, Harry exited his room and walked down to the kitchen, where they took their breakfast in the mornings. As he entered, Marvolo placed the newspaper down and stood, smiling in a way he obviously thought to be friendly. Harry was not sure if it actually was, it had a slightly puzzled quality.

“Good morning and Happy Birthday, Henry. I hope you slept well?”

“I did, thank you, sir,” nodded the teenager, his eyes almost magically drawn to a table piled with wrapped boxes and objects, waiting to one side of the room. It appeared to be bigger than the pile Dudley had gotten for the last birthday Harry had had to stay with the Dursleys.

“Yes, these are all for you. Some people will bring your presents to the party in the afternoon, and I think those that are invited to the party your godfather is planning have not sent their presents here... Maybe eat something first?”

Feeling a little like he was dreaming, Harry nodded, walked over to his chair, and sat down. The green-eyed teen spoke not a word while they were eating, and only a quick levitation charm from Marvolo kept the pitcher with orange juice from falling over and spilling its contents all over the table as Harry tipped it over.

After a few more near-accidents the red-eyed man – he never glamoured his eyes when they were at home and alone – finally asked “Is everything all right, Henry? Are you not feeling well?”

Hearing a concerned question from the man still was such a conundrum that it snapped Harry out of his stupor. “I never got this many presents, it feels like I'm dreaming,” the teenager confessed and started a little at the flash of fury in the red eyes.

“Maybe you should start with opening them, then, so you can see that it is real,” Marvolo said summoning one of the smaller parcels over to him, and handing it to Harry.

“From me. I think you might find it useful.”
Accepting the book-shaped gift, Harry murmured a quiet “Thank you,” and opened the deep green silken ribbon wrapped around it.

Inside was indeed a book, a handwritten one, quite old by the looks of it, with the title *The Magic of Intent* printed in silver on the cover. Something was odd about the script, but Harry could not pinpoint what it was until his guardian added an explanation, and he spotted the name of the author.

“It was written by Salazar Slytherin in something that seems to be a written form of Parseltongue. I can teach it to you, if you are interested. I found it in a small study behind a wall somewhere in the dungeons. It covers the theory of how magic can work without incantations, wands, and all the other things that are now considered necessary tools.” The man almost sounded embarrassed over the gift he had chosen, and Harry quickly tried to reassure him that he was happy with it.

And he was, in fact, it was a really thoughtful gift, an heirloom from the Slytherin family, the family his mother had been descended from.

“Thank you, sir. I will make sure to care for it well.”

After that Harry started to open all the other presents. He quickly noticed that many were from Death Eaters. Those mostly got him sweets – after a few gifts he started to get a sample of the entire Honeydukes product line – and books about Quidditch. A few books were summoned out of his hands before he could get a good look at them, and at his questioning glance in Marvolo’s direction, the man lifted a brow and asked in a pointed tone, “Are you interested in learning the Dark Arts?” Harry shook his head quite fervently. “Then you will have no use for those books. Can you give me the cards that came with those as well? I think I have to explain what I meant by *age appropriate* to a few of them.”

He even got a present from Professor Snape. In the box was a little picture in a frame, showing a young red-haired girl with a couple who were obviously her parents, sitting on a bench in front of a lake, smiling into the camera. And underneath it was an exquisitely crafted silver potions knife. The card that was inside was written in the distinct spiky handwriting Harry knew so well by now.

*In the hope that good tools will help improve your performance. The picture was something I found in my old school things. Happy Birthday.*

After that they got ready for the party that would be held in the gardens around Potter Manor, showering and changing into their best robes. Harry wasn’t sure that it was a wise move, he totally planned to play Quidditch, but as the robes were getting too short anyway, it probably didn’t matter.

Later Harry only remembered the day in snatches.

The first time someone made a real fuss of his birthday.

He would always remember fondly the one time he had celebrated his birthday at the Burrow, the cake in the shape of a snitch, the day in the wilderness called a garden.

But this was different.

Xerxes Lestrange was there, and he had brought Hermione, this fact made Malfoy almost trip over
There were many members of the Wizengamot, almost all Slytherins of his year, and their younger and older siblings. Many grown-ups, a few toddlers. It was a bigger crowd than Harry was strictly comfortable with. And at the same time, so large a crowd he could avoid those he didn't want to speak with, once the greetings were out of the way.

Despite it all, Harry enjoyed the games of pick-up Quidditch they played with the brooms they found in the little shed by the pitch, cheered on by Hermione and some of the others who were not comfortable on a broom. The food was excellent, and the games and activities organized for the children kept Harry occupied so that he could ignore the politics going on around them, as the adults watched and spoke to one another.

The day came to a close as Harry took part in a traditional group dance the boys and girls performed on the dance floor, surrounded by all the other guests.

Later, when Harry found himself back in his bed at home – and it really had become home, even with Voldemort/Marvolo living there with him – sleep found him fast, a happy smile on his face.

Standing to the side, not encroaching on the happy celebration, and trying to keep out of his son's perception, Marvolo watched Henry interact with all the other children. It was obvious that he preferred the company of Miss Granger, Heir Longbottom and Heir Nott over most of the others. But he saw no reason why he should try to change that. They all were acceptable choices, and trying to meddle with this would most likely backfire on him.

At the moment he stood with Lucius and his wife, as well as Xerxes, drinking one of the white wines, smiling to himself as he noticed that Narcissa had opted for a strawberry lemonade. “How are your plans for the school progressing, Xerxes?” he asked his old school friend, genuine interest colouring his voice.

“I have plans for the subjects I would want to be taught. And I have thought about a way to get the younger students to the school, as well as a way to inform and monitor non-magical parents. What I am missing at the moment is a building and a name.”

“A school?” Narcissa asked clearly interested.

“Yes. After Marvolo told me about my dear Hermione, I realized that we should try to prevent the Squibs from leaving our world altogether. And I think a school for them to learn at, would help to realize this. And if I already start a school, I can be thorough and add classes for young children as well,” The grey-haired wizard happily explained.

“Hermione Granger?” Lucius asked, not yet aware of the relationship between the older wizard and the young witch.

“Yes, she is the daughter of the son of my older sister. Dorcas was a Squib and left the family for
the Muggle world soon after she was not accepted at Hogwarts. I never heard from her again. But Hermione was curious enough to get herself tested at Gringotts, and in this way found out about the fact that I am her great-uncle. I'm really happy that she accepted my offer to help her find her place in our world.”

Marvolo chuckled to himself at the look of utter disbelief on Lucius' face and turned to Narcissa. He had to ask her something and now was probably the best time to do so. “Narcissa, may I ask for a favour?”

“What can I help you with, Marvolo?” She asked with a friendly smile. They had agreed to call each other by their given names earlier that day, working further on making a believable reconciliation after the horrible things Voldemort had supposedly done to the Malfoys.

“I need someone to teach Henry the finer points of etiquette and manners, dancing, and so on. The last witch I asked to teach him was not able to follow my directions. She was unable to teach without corporal punishment.” He sneered, clearly expressing his disdain for something as crude as slaps as tools of education. “Draco is such a well-behaved young man. I think you taught him yourself?”

Flattered, Narcissa inclined her head. “Yes, I taught him myself. I think it works best to teach those important things to your children without the help of strangers. But I understand that you are not in a position to do so. After so many years without proper care, the estate is likely taking up most of your time.” Her hand placed over her heart, the other holding her glass, Narcissa smiled understandingly, reassuring Marvolo that he, as a wizard and Head of an Ancient and Noble House, could not be expected to teach etiquette to his son.

“Maybe you can teach both Henry and Hermione together. She is eager to learn, but had not the time nor the inclination to do so before now,” Xerxes pitched into the conversation.

It didn't take long before they had arranged two lessons a week for the two children to be drilled in the right way to walk, talk, eat, and dance like proper little heirs. For convenience and safety they would be held at Griffin House.

After that, they started to talk more about the school Xerxes was planning, and Marvolo watched Lucius put the pieces together.

Once the party broke up, all children going home happy and tired, the blond Lord had understood what was happening in the wizarding world.

And Marvolo was happy, despite the problems with the ancestry tests and the Goblins his plans were working out better than he could have hoped for.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published 27th of May
Timeline, for your convenience: (Because it feels longer and I thought you would like to know :) )

- 11th of July – Adoption
- 17th of July – Sirius' trial
- 23rd of July – Garden Party at the Malfoy's
- 1st of August – Party at the Burrow (that is this chapter)

Harry, wearing jeans and a bright red t-shirt, as well as a pair of new trainers, was standing beside the Floo, waiting for his guardian to arrive. The man had said that he would take his son to the Burrow and would later come and pick him up again.

The teenager was not sure that this was a good idea, but he was sure that it was not a good idea to argue about it. The look in the red eyes as Marvolo had announced his plan had not been one to argue with. That much Harry had learned in the time they had now lived together.

It only had been three weeks since he had been adopted. It felt so much longer than that. What all had happened, what he had learned in that short a time. And it would only be four more weeks until it would be time to go back to Hogwarts again. In a way, this summer was longer than any he had had to spend at the Dursley's.

And better.

Visiting Sirius as often as he did, being able to cast magic – as long as he was in one of the heavily warded houses belonging to one of those he now was forced to associate with – learning even more magic, not needing to worry over owl post upsetting his aunt and uncle or alerting the neighbours. It was great living full-time in the magical world.

The now fifteen-year-old teenager was getting nervous – he really did not want to be late to his own party – when Marvolo finally walked into the room.

“Are you ready to attend your second birthday party?” Harry was asked, and the green eyes filled with a mix of excitement and trepidation. There was no telling in what way Ron would react.

“Yes, sir,” Harry nodded his head, black locks falling into his eyes.

“Good, then we will apparate to the edge of their wards. I'm not sure if it would be wise trying to use the Floo directly inside.” This was said absolutely casually, and Harry realized that the Dark Lord Voldemort knew where the Weasleys lived if he was able to apparate to the edge of the wards around the Burrow. Not a comforting thought.

Harry took hold of the offered arm, stepping closer, so that the apparation hopefully would not be so hard on his system.

With a faint crack they vanished from the reception room, to reappear almost instantly just outside
Sirius sat outside the Burrow watching as the older kids of Arthur and Molly set the table out for Harry's birthday party. The dog animagus knew that there had been a party yesterday, but he preferred to think of this as the real one, the party Harry got to invite only the people he wanted to invite.

In his own mind, Lord Black could admit that it probably was not the ideal party. In the last weeks he had seen that Harry had started to develop a friendship with one of the Slytherins, the Nott boy. And his memories of how hard it had been to try to maintain a connection with his brother after they had been sorted into different houses were still fresh enough. What he remembered of the difficulties Lily had had trying to stay friends with Snape only added to his knowledge. Harry now was in an equally tight spot, or would be soon enough.

Friendships across house boundaries were hard, and harder still if the houses were Slytherin and Gryffindor.

Neville, Ron, Fred, and George finished placing the plates, while Ginny was inside helping her mother finish the cake. Hermione, whom he had picked up a little earlier at her parents' house, was sitting to the side under an apple tree, surrounded by the files he had promised to get her.

When she had told him this morning that she intended to take Xerxes Lestrange up on his offer to get her lessons on how to be an heiress, he had been speechless for a few moments. And before he could regain his senses enough to start dressing her down on how she could let Lestrange have so much influence over her, she had asked him if he had gotten the voting records of House Lestrange.

Then and there he had known that Hermione Granger, great-niece of the current Lord Lestrange, was not one to take information at face value. She would tap into all sources of information she could get her hands on and then form her own opinion.

Ever since he had handed her the files and she had shuffled over to a secluded spot – after Molly had said she should go ahead and that the boys could help her prepare the garden for the party – he had been contemplating the implications of a 'muggle-born' heiress to the Lestrange Family. It had appeal, and was sure to shake the old structure up.

Taking everything into account, concentrating on the public and the good it would do for their society, it would be better for the Lestrange family to carry on with Hermione as the Head sometime in the future than to perish without an heir. After all he had learned about her, the quest to free house-elves, her attempt to save the hippogriff he later had flown to freedom with... she certainly had a novel outlook on their world.

“Knut for your thoughts,” Remus said, sitting down beside his last remaining friend from school.

“Aren’t my thoughts worth more to you?” Sirius answered with mock indignation.
Remus laughed, looking so much better than he had done only last month. With his well-paid job as Harry's history tutor, he could buy food and all the other things he had had to go without for too long.

Sirius joined in, and they laughed in simple merriment for a few moments.

“I thought about what changes wizarding Britain would undergo should Hermione Granger choose to become heiress to Xerxes Lestrange,” the canine animagus finally answered his friend after they both had calmed down.

Remus nodded thoughtfully. “I agree, she's not one to be coerced into acting against her morals.”

“Let's just hope that she'll be enough.” Sirius sighed and got up as he heard a crack from the border of the property. It was about the time that Harry should show up. Maybe that was him and Lord Slytherin.

Carefully balancing a huge creation of vanilla ice cream and various berries, placed under a cooling charm by his mother, Ron made his way out to the table set up in the garden. He hoped that he would be able to speak with Harry. He was not happy with the way their last meeting had gone. He really hoped that he could get Harry to see reason. His mother had given him a stern talk about his behaviour towards his two friends, and he had not been happy about it.

Ron was aware that neither of them had chosen who they were related to, but he did not comprehend why they were okay with it. At least it felt as if they were okay with it. And that just did not make sense to Ron. If he were in their shoes, he would refuse to eat, run away, scream... in short, do everything he was capable of to make clear that he was not okay with the situation.

He had set the mountain of ice cream down on the table as there was the sound of apparation from the front of the house. The red-head turned around, peering around his brothers, and spotted Harry speaking to the tall well-dressed wizard he had seen in Diagon Alley.

Gathering all his courage, Ron started to walk over and watched as the dark wizard bowed to his mother before he spun and vanished again, leaving Harry behind.

Ron broke into a sprint, crashing into Harry, who had stepped through the gate into the garden.

Harry laughed, “Hi, Ron! I missed you too!”

Several minutes of exchanged hugs and happy greetings followed, ending with them all seated around the table behind the house, Harry at the head of the table with Ron to his right and Hermione to his left. A small heap of presents was piled in front of Harry, and Ron's mother encouraged the birthday-boy to open them.

Smiling, Harry complied. Hermione had gotten him a set of two books, she had given him one yesterday, and now he got the second. Ron had to keep from rolling his eyes, as it was a set on ancient Egyptian script. He really did not get Hermione's preference for learning.

The twins had gotten Harry a box of their best tested joke candies, they promised to explain them properly. And their Declaration:
“You have to test them on...”
“...his evilness!”
“We really would like to know...”
“...If they work well on someone as powerful...”
“...as him.” got several different reactions.

Sirius started to laugh and their mother to scold at this exuberant display of the twins, and Harry paled under his summer tan. Maybe he was not as happy as Ron had believed him to be.

The other presents were quickly opened. Remus had gotten Harry a book with the title *The Art of War*, claiming it had something to do with one of the history lessons they had had. Sirius had purchased a set of Quidditch practice balls in a nice wooden chest. Ron had opted to give his best friend a fan shirt from his own favourite Quidditch team, the Chudley Cannons. It was rather hard to come up with a present for Harry. And his parents had organised the party.

Once the presents were opened, the cake was distributed, and they had a cheerful afternoon, forgetting the problems surrounding them, laughing and joking, enjoying the cake and ice cream.

“How was your birthday party yesterday?” Ron's father wanted to know suddenly.

And there were all of Ron's worries again. “You had a party yesterday, and didn't invite me?” the youngest Weasley son demanded to know in a dangerous tone.

Looking sheepishly for help from Hermione or his godfather, Harry shrugged a little helplessly. “I didn't think you would have had fun?” It sounded somewhat like a question, even though it truly was none.

Not letting Ron start on the rant he so wanted to let loose on his friend, Hermione prevented any of the others from speaking by starting to explain in that bossy way she sometimes got about her. “Lord Slytherin made the guest list. He only invited political associates. I was only there because Lord Lestrange took me with him. And Neville didn't look too happy either, among all those Slytherins and Ravenclaws. It was mostly politics, and a boring adult party.”

“No,” Ron shouted cutting her off, “you didn't even ask!” Ron screamed into his friend's face. “Maybe I would have liked to come! You couldn't have known! You're becoming one of the snakes! You... you... traitor!”

Ron jumped up from his chair, knocking it over in his haste to get away. Not reacting to the others calling for him to stop, come back, Ron ran over to the orchard, vanishing under the trees.

Harry was stumped. He had feared something like this would happen, and now he realized that not asking his friend to come to his party had not been his best idea. It just seemed so pointless and potentially dangerous to invite Ron to a party that Draco Malfoy and many more Slytherins would be attending, a disaster in the making.
As the teenager stood from his own chair, he realized that this was a surprisingly Slytherin way of looking at the situation. Dismissing the thought – now was not the right time to contemplate his less rash actions in the last weeks – Harry started to walk after his first human friend his own age. He had to make this distinction, Hagrid and Hedwig had been his first friends, after all.

He simply had to find a way to mend this disagreement. If he only knew what had Ron's knickers in a twist.

Not paying attention to the few words exchanged between those remaining at the table, Harry walked through the wonderful wild garden surrounding the Burrow down to the orchard they had used more than once to play Quidditch in.

He didn't hurry, giving Ron some time to cool down, and giving himself some time to compose an apology for not asking him to come to his birthday party on his actual birthday.

Finding his friend under a pear tree, leaning against the tree trunk, Harry settled beside him in the grass. It was getting dark. The crickets were making noise, providing a nice backdrop for their silence.

“I'm sorry for not trying to invite you. But Hermione has it right, I didn't make the guest list. Not sure if I could have managed to get your name on it.”

Ron remained silent, clenching his hands into fists repeatedly, still aggravated.

“Can you tell me what the problem is?” Harry asked quietly. He was no Legilimens, and even if he could have read his friend's thoughts, he would not do so. It would be a gross breach of trust between them. “Why are you so angry at me?”

“You're transforming into a pureblood git!” Ron answered, yelling, desperation evident in his voice. “The clothes, the way you talk, walk, write! You'll be another Malfoy! I'll loose my friend!”

At first Harry was stumped, again. Why would he become an idiot like Malfoy? Just because he was being made to learn some things?

But as he thought a few moments in the growing darkness under the trees, he realized that from outside it would look different. Seen from Ron's perspective, all the things that had changed about him – the fact he no longer had to wear Dudley's cast-offs, that he was made to pay more attention to the way he moved and talked – were probably hints that Harry would, or at least could, lose himself and turn into a stuck-up idiot.

How to go about explaining?

“My father was Lord Potter when he died. He worked in the Wizengamot. The portrait of my grandfather told me about it. Don't you think my dad would have wanted me to follow him into this role, someday?”

Reluctantly the red-haired and blue-eyed teenager nodded.

“And when I have to be a Lord, do you think I'll be able to achieve what I want to, without knowing the rules they all play by?”

Ron shook his head, his hands relaxing, his posture less stiff.
“Just because I know how to be a 'stuck-up pureblood' does not mean I will act like one all the time. What I do out of the public eye doesn’t have to fit the image I am required to hold up in public.”

They were quiet for some time, watching the sun go down the rest of the way behind the horizon, each lost in their own thoughts.

“This is all really fucked up, isn’t it?” Ron suddenly whispered in the dark, not turning to look at Harry who was still sitting in the grass.

“You can say that again!” Harry agreed wholeheartedly. “The whole thing is terribly confusing. The house is great, and the portrait…” He started with enthusiasm, only to trail off as he saw a clenching fist out of the corner of his eye.

“But most of the time it is really confusing.” Harry shifted topics rather suddenly to something he knew for sure would agree more with Ron. “I constantly wait for him to snap back to his normal way of acting, but he never does! And do you know what the weirdest thing is about the whole mess?”

Ron shook his head but Harry could see clear as day, even with the poor lighting they had in their spot in under the pear tree, that his friend was curious. “If I compare this summer to those I had to spend at Privet Drive… It is better, worlds better, than that, despite him.” Harry stressed the last word and shook his head ruefully. “Can you imagine that?”

Ron had a slightly horrified look on his face. “Were they that bad?!”

Harry made a grimace, count on his friends to pick up exactly the things he wished they would ignore. “Well, this summer I’ve actually been getting food regularly. I get to visit Sirius and my friends. No problems sending owl post, Hedwig is not imprisoned in her cage… Shall I go on?”

Ron haltingly shook his head. “No, I think I get it. The whole everyday stuff is easier with someone not hating magic. I get it. But it's still weird as hell, mate!”

“You can say that again. Sometimes I wish I just could be normal for once.”

That got Ron chuckling and they started to retell all the adventures they had that marked both of them as not really normal students of Hogwarts.

It was a few hours later that Mrs. Weasley went into the kitchen to get a late-night snack for them, some blackberry cobbler she had hidden away somewhere. Harry sat, tired but content, between his two best friends, listening to the twins telling them all about some of their more successful experiments.

After Ron and he had returned from the orchard, the day had taken a turn for the better. Harry would describe the current state of their relationship as an uneasy truce, and he was vexed about the fact that the constant lessons on political alliances and the Slytherin families’ way to go about them were having an impact on how he thought about interactions with others.

It went against everything he had experienced with his friends, and at the same time felt more
natural than he was prepared to admit. In Gryffindor you either were friends or you were not – a concept clearly demonstrated on several occasions in the past by most of his house-mates – not this disturbing grey area of in-between states of relationship he now had to consider.

All still sitting at the table turned as they heard the tell-tale sound of someone apparating in sounding from the edge of the wards around the property.

It was dark in the garden, only the occasional lampion floating in the air casting some multicoloured lights, so they could see only that someone was at the fence, but not who it was.

Mr. Weasley got up, and Harry started to get up as well, because he had a fairly good idea who it might be. It was late, after all, and Marvolo had said he would be back to pick him up. So far the man had done exactly as he said he would, with everything. It felt a little unnatural, who on earth was able to fulfil all the promises they made, follow through with all plans?

Just before he could stand, both adult Weasleys came back. Mrs. Weasley was levitating a big casserole emitting mouth-watering scents, and Mr. Weasley was leading a casually-clothed Lord Slytherin to the table.

Before the awkwardness could settle in – Harry assumed that people who had engaged in actual combat against each other would be awkward around each other in a peaceful setting they did not really trust – Mrs. Weasley addressed the man that had come to pick up his ward. “We just wanted to eat some blackberry cobbler from the first blackberries this year, to conclude the day. Do you have you to leave now, or is it possible to stay a bit longer?”

Several startled gasps sounded around the table as Molly Weasley invited the man called only You-Know-Who by the family to sit at their table and share their food.

Said wizard inclined his head politely, smiling, and after a quick glance at Harry answered with the best manners possible. “I never would decline the opportunity to sample the famous cooking I have heard about in the past weeks. Thank you for inviting me.”

And to the astonishment of all present, Lord Slytherin walked around the table and sat down in the chair next to Harry, smiling politely and accepting a plate from the resolute matriarch of the family.

“Either he is the best actor ever, or he had a personality transplant when he got a new body,” Sirius griped next to him, as they watched Harry leave with Lord Slytherin.

Remus turned to his friend and smiled a little sadly. “Albus always assures us that he was able to lie like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Even as a student. So I would guess that he just is that good an actor.”

“He never slips?” Sirius wanted to know, staring off to the distant stars in this warm summer night.

“I've never seen it. And judging by the relaxed atmosphere in the house, I guess he doesn't slip there either, even if I’m not around.”

“You think he just goes elsewhere to be a Dark Lord?” Remus furrowed his brow. Why did Sirius
sound so hopeful?

“If I were him, I would make sure to keep everything not strictly legal away from the place everyone knows I live at, Padfoot. What are you on about?”

“Still hoping to find a way to get Harry back home,” Sirius sighed. “But I guess it is rather unlikely by now. Do you know why Dumbledore did not try to get Harry’s story about what happened in the graveyard into the process of ‘freeing’ him from his past?”

Remus shook his head. “He never told me. But maybe he was reluctant to bring Harry there, or it wouldn’t have been possible to bring him there in time?”

They both remained silent for a moment until Sirius finally added another idea. “Or maybe he thought after the smear campaign by that Skeeter woman, everything he might have said would have been discounted?”

Remus nodded thoughtfully, and they both stayed silent until it was time to go home.

oooOOooo

Marvolo was pacing in his office at Griffin House. He had tried to work, revising for the OWL exams he had registered for that were to be held in the last week of August, and had abandoned the task after a few moments, unable to focus.

Originally he had hoped to be sitting by Henry's side while Malcolm Greengrass was tending his son's badly healed bones. But the boy had declined his offer to stay, almost demanded Marvolo to leave. And so he had nodded to the healer, said he would be waiting downstairs and went to do just that.

Marvolo knew that Malcolm was a master of the bone-breaking curse, had worked long to be able to break a bone exactly in the place he wanted to. Never had a prisoner died from unintentionally inflicted damage when the younger Greengrass had been in charge of interrogation.

Henry would be fine.

But strangely this knowledge did nothing to ease Marvolo's mind.

To pass the time until the family Healer would be finished, Marvolo started to analyse his new feelings, occluding as best he could to keep away the pain his son probably was feeling – despite the strong potion made by Severus, to dull the pain and send the child into a calm and relaxed state – and to contain his irritation.

In a way it was logical that not only positive emotions, like elation over well-working plans or amusement about floundering Death Eaters, would come back, but that those he had rather not have, and had been happy to lose in the past, would be back as well.

He understood anger and frustration and could deal with them, but the small stirrings of friendship he felt towards Xerxes, or the not-really-clear feelings towards Severus – and if that situation was not frustrating he did not know what was – this obvious concern for the well-being of another made him anxious.
He huffed in frustration and threw himself into the chair behind his desk.

Marvolo was aware that the regaining of half his soul had had a positive impact on him. His magical strength was still growing, his ability to reason was much better now. Planning and scheming was easy and brought him satisfaction, something he had only been able to gain through torturing someone in the months before he had lost his last body.

Every so often the thought of what would happen were he to absorb other horcruxes back into his body, mending his soul, came to him. He was reluctant to really consider this idea, but his researching on how to safely remove the horcrux from his son made sure that these thoughts were never far away.

Easier command of his magic, more of it at his disposal, but equally more feelings, more empathy... probably, he was not sure if he truly was capable of feeling with others... he was truly undecided.

With the knock on his door, the first Lord Slytherin in centuries banished all thoughts pertaining to split souls and their impact on the one doing the splitting, and called out “Enter!” sitting up straighter in his chair, so as not to let the other see the distress he was in.

Healer Greengrass, wearing a light coloured robe, entered upon the call, walked a few steps into the room, and sank gracefully onto one knee, his robes pooling around him on the ground. “My Lord,” he said in a calm voice, only a hint of strain to be heard.

“Report,” was Marvolo's curt order, he had no patience left at the moment. And he felt not a morsel of remorse as he saw the healer flinch.

The man raised his head, looking up to his Lord and started to report, as ordered. “The potion from Master Snape worked wonders. Your son, my Lord, stayed calm through the entire procedure.” Taking a deep breath as if to brace himself, Malcolm continued. “I had to break ten different bones. I healed each one only an instant later. Your son has a remarkable pain tolerance and made my task easier by remaining still during my work. I'm not sure what to think of this,” the young man added with troubled blue eyes.

Marvolo only nodded, he had noticed this high tolerance to pain himself the night he had regained a body, and he had a clear idea where this came from. Marvolo had to restrain his temper. How he would like to take out his rage on those blasted Muggles.

“Now he is sleeping, and will probably not wake till morning. I advise for him to rest the whole day, and to take this dose of Skele-Gro.” The healer got a small vial filled with the potion from a pocket of his robes, which Marvolo floated over to himself, setting it down on the desk. “After that, he should be fine.”

Eyeing his follower, Marvolo noticed that the strain he had heard in the man's voice was not entirely caused by heavy use of intricate magic within a short time frame, but from something else as well.

“What has you so tense, Malcolm?”

“As per your orders, my Lord, I explained what I would be doing before your son took the potion.” The young man looked troubled and Marvolo wondered what had him so agitated. Was there
something wrong with Henry? Had he expressed distrust for the healer?

“He questioned why I would be using a curse to re-break the badly healed bones, and I could almost see his further, unvoiced, questions once I explained that I was most sure to get it right with this particular spell over others that might be used for the same purpose.”

Not in the mood to let Malcolm struggle further with expressing his concerns, Marvolo interjected with a – maybe overdue – explanation. “Henry is aware of the fact that you are one of my sworn followers. It might not have been spoken openly, but I have called you in a manner he would recognize, and you have addressed me and behaved in my presence as Henry has seen Death Eaters do on numerous occasions by now. He is not so oblivious as not to realize that you are old enough to have been in my service before my fall, nor that your duties were not only in healing your fellows. It seems he will not judge you based on assumptions. So do not fret overly much. If questions come up about whether something you want, or need, to use is to be considered dark, send him to me for answers.”

After that the man was quickly sent on his way, and Marvolo moved up the stairs, followed by Nagini, to check on his son.

One more problem taken care of. It seemed possible to get the boy into a healthy state before he had to send him off to school on the first of September.

oooOOooo

The day after having several bones broken by a curse, just so they could be set and healed correctly right afterwards, Harry lay resting on his big comfortable bed in his room at Griffin House.

The teenager was glad that his healer had commanded him to take this day lightly, resting for the most part, as it simply was too hot and humid to move much. A thunderstorm in the evening was likely.

Surrounded by all the books he had been given for his birthday, currently reading the one he had been given by Marvolo, Harry enjoyed the silence.

Nagini was resting in a patch of sunlight, lazily flicking her tongue out to check the scent in the room from time to time, keeping him company, as she had proclaimed after she had let herself in. Harry had not known that a snake could operate door handles. It made him think about using a locking charm on his door before going to sleep. Even if the big snake was nice to talk to most of the time, he did not fancy to wake to her being draped over his legs.

Taking another deep red bean from the case of “Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans” he had gotten for his birthday – he had had luck most of the time today – Harry flipped the page over and continued reading as a knock on the door got his attention.

Who might that be? It was not really a question, as only one other person was in the house, but there was a small chance it could be Professor Snape or maybe Lupin for a theory lesson. He had still so much to learn that it felt a little like wasting time just to be resting.

“Come in!” Harry called around the surprisingly hot bean – maybe some kind of chili? – and set the book aside as Vol- no, Marvolo walked in carrying several books and rolls of parchment.
“How do you feel, Henry?” the man wanted to know, taking the scene before him in with his red eyes.

“Okay, I think. Tired and hot.”

The adult wizard chuckled a little. “It is rather hot today. May I ask you something?”

Intrigued by the unusual fidgety manner of the man called a Dark Lord, Harry only nodded, not bothering with offering the other a seat. If he wanted to sit, he probably just would do so.

“I’m in need of some help revising the theory for my transfiguration OWL. Would you mind?” The man held the material he had brought out to Harry, his wavy hair now reaching his shoulders and brushing the emerald robes he wore over a simple ensemble of shirt and trousers.

“You want me to help you revise for OWLs?” Harry could not help but feel confused at this request. And this confusion sounded strong in his voice.

“Yes. I want you to help me study. I’d rather ask my son for help – who is still attending school and used to taking exams – than ask one of those that have been out of school for a long time too.”

Books and scrolls were floated in the air and a chair conjured. “I’m sure that I will have no problem with any of the practical parts of the exams, but transfiguration is not something I studied to any great extent once I had finished school, so my theory is a little rusty.”

Harry was still staring dumbfounded as Marvolo sat down in the comfortable leather arm chair now standing in the middle of the room between the bed and the bookcase beside the door.

“Why do you even need to take OWLs again?” Harry wanted to know, too confused to bother with the normally added polite ‘sir’ he tacked on when speaking with the wizard.

“Have I not told you?” Marvolo asked, furrowing his brow in thought. “Maybe not. Well, when I was freed of responsibility for all crimes that might have been laid at my feet, Dumbledore made sure that all former academic achievements of mine were no longer mine to claim. I have to repeat the OWLs as well as NEWTs. I intend to take the OWLs this summer. So I have to freshen up my knowledge now.”

Still a little bemused, and amused over the pettiness of the Headmaster, Harry nodded and accepted the books that were now floating through the air towards him. “You know that I do not yet know all the stuff taught in fifth year, sir?” He got a nod from Marvolo as well as an impatient hand wave to just go on with it.

So Harry unfurled one of the scrolls, uncovering methodically made notes in a neat cursive, and started asking questions.

And so the rest of the afternoon was spent studying. First Harry asked his guardian questions on transfiguration, which were answered quite accurate most of the time, Marvolo only stumbled once or twice over some definition, which he grumpily decreed narrow-minded and not really lining up with his experience, later they changed to talking about the essay Harry had to write for charms.

It was oddly peaceful, and Harry wondered what Sirius might think, what his friends might think, if he had told them he had been studying for OWLs with You-Know-Who. Hermione would probably ask what they had been studying; Ron would want to know why he had studied during the holidays and if it had been Dark Magic... Thinking about Ron was still very confusing and Harry just continued to stay in the moment, relishing in the attention he got from an adult, for the first time, positive
attention directed at him, and only him.

Sitting in one of the frequent staff meetings on Friday the fourth – they had more staff meetings this summer than any Severus could remember – the Potions Master did not listen to Pomona advocating for some new plants to acquire, again, but mused over his first week of August.

After the big Party given for his Lord’s heir – he still had trouble with deciding what to call the boy in his own mind, even if he had decided to call him Slytherin around the crowd of his Lord, and Potter around the Order – Narcissa had invited him over to a smaller party at her home and set him up for a date with one of her friends who had gone to Beauxbatons for a date. It was one of the more awkward social interactions he had had to endure in quite some time.

And as sad as it was to admit it, that was saying something.

Maybe enlisting her help had not been such a bright idea in the end. But he was at a loss where he might find a woman to marry. He would not consider one of his colleagues – he had to suppress a shudder at that thought – and most who were younger than he were either married, not interested in marriage, or had been his students at one point. Maybe he should settle for one of the woman he knew of who were not really interested in men – for whatever reason – but wanting to stick with tradition in providing heirs for their families. On second thought, he still had over half a year to search, so there was no necessity to forego a chance for a satisfactory relationship just now.

As Filius started to propose the idea of some in-depth study projects for some of his NEWT charms students, Severus shifted his thoughts over to the Occlumency and potions lessons he was giving to Lily’s son. Only the day before, he had instructed the boy on the different ways to grind ingredients. He had been slightly surprised by how precisely the child suddenly was working. As he had a look at the notes his student was taking, he started again. The boy’s writing was so much neater. Even neater than after the boy had been shown a better way to handle a quill than the one he had picked up by himself from his friends. It had taken Severus only a moment to come to the conclusion that one of the bones that had had to be re-broken and mended – Malcolm Greengrass had asked him to brew a potions to dull the pain and keep the child calm, so he had been required to explain in detail what it was he had planned to do – had troubled the boy while writing.

It troubled him greatly that he had not noticed what had been happening to one of the children he was teaching. He normally prided himself with noticing such heavy cases of bullying, even if it was happening at home. That this had slipped his notice just drove home how much he had chosen to disregard the child.

The Occlumency lessons were progressing well too. In one of the next lessons he would start to actually use Legilimency. The Potions Master was more than a little surprised that the child had picked up a method of meditation so fast.

When Minerva started to speak about the fact that the letters had not gone out yet, Severus started to actually pay attention to the present.

“Seriously, Albus! We cannot hold out on the letters much longer. The new first-years have been informed, but we need to inform the new prefects, so they have time to accept or decline their appointments. We need to send out the supply lists.” Albus made as if to speak, but closed his
mouth again as Minerva simply kept talking, her green eyes looking furious from behind her square spectacles. “I know we still have no new Defence Professor and you hope to avoid letting the Ministry appoint one, but we simply need to inform our students of what they need to buy for their next year.”

Albus sighed, giving a weary look to his deputy. “You are, of course, right my dear. Do you think we can delay another week? I hope to visit a few possible candidates before then.”

Minerva gave the Headmaster a short and unhappy nod and the topic of conversation shifted again. Now the attack of Dementors on a group of teenagers and their tutor was the topic of discussion. Severus listened only with half an ear as the others voiced their concern if the Ministry would lose the control of the Dementors soon and what to do if this should happen.

To his great relief the meeting came to an end shortly after. And as he swept out of the room before any of the others he took a deep breath. Since he had changed his wardrobe from almost all black clothes to some more ‘cheerful’ colours, his colleagues tended to remark on his choice of robes almost every time they met. In some way he understood that the change from only wearing black and the odd white shirt to dark blues, greens, and even reds was a big step. But why the others had to comment on it more than once, that he did not understand.

Taking a deep breath, Severus marched down to his potions lab. He had the stock for the infirmary to replenish, and only a few weeks left until term would start. Not knowing what Albus or his Lord might come up with in the interim, he was resolved to use the time he had.

Kingsley was sitting at his desk with Tonks, both of them going over a roughly sketched plan on how they planned to investigate that Dementor attack from the end of July.

“We need to find the order that sent the Dementors there,” Kingsley reconfirmed with a resolute nod.

Tonk’s bubblegum pink hair flopped with her not-as-enthusiastic nod. “That is going to be a nightmare. Have you seen the filing room? Some nutjob has cast some experimental sorting charm in there, everything is in a mess on the floor.”

A sigh from the bald, older Auror was the only confirmation. The filing room was a mess. A little too convenient for whomever sent Dementors to attack kids. But sadly it was a rather common occurrence at the Ministry of Magic of late. The Department responsible for all the paperwork had offered a reward for a more efficient sorting charm, and so everyone with only a faint idea of spellcrafting was trying their luck.

Kingsley suspected that the culprit knew of this and had used it to his or her advantage.

And as those papers all were spelled against direct summoning… It was a nightmare!

The two of them just had stood from the desk they had been working at as the Head of the Auror Department came over to them. Scrimgeour was followed by Dawlish.

“Shacklebolt! Tonks! You are about to start the investigation into the incident from the 23rd?” Both Aurors confirmed with a nod. “Tonks, I need you for an undercover operation against a man
selling fake Felix Felicis.” The wizard with his lion-like head of hair waved the wizard following him forward. “Dawlish volunteered to help with this investigation.” Turning on his heel Scrimgeour called to Tonks to follow him and she complied with an exasperated look to Kingsley.

Several tense moments the wizards stood across from each other, trying to weigh the other with their eyes.

“I know we don’t see eye-to-eye most of the time. But I would like to believe that we all want to know who would send Dementors after children. Am I right?” Dawlish finally broke the silence.

The wheels were turning in Kingsley’s head. The Order knew that there were people of You-Know-Who in most of the Ministry Departments. Even here in the Auror Department, despite how hard it was to admit it. So was this wizard one of the Death Eaters? It did sound as if he was insinuating that he was. But until he saw the Dark Mark on the man’s arm he could not be sure.

“I guess so.” Pausing for a moment, Kingsley weighed his options. In the end there was not much he could do. “We wanted to start with the search for the order that sent the Dementors into the Forest of Dean. Other suggestions?”

Dawlish shook his head. “No. We need to know the name on the order.” He walked a few steps in the direction of the elevators before he spun on his heel. “What are you waiting for?”

Reluctantly Kingsley followed.

As they stepped into the elevator down to the archive, Kingsley murmured to himself, “I hope our culprit doesn't simply vanish.”

He was startled out of his musings as the man standing beside him said quietly, “It's almost impossible to predict how he will act once we know a name.”

There was nothing more to say after that, and they started to sort through the mounds of paper on the search for one single Dementor attack order form the moment they reached the archive.

Kingsley let his brown eyes wander through the room, over the chaos in it. Months of work were waiting here. He sighed and started to sort the files at his feet.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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In the smaller ballroom in the west wing of Malfoy Manor, four teenagers moved over the dance floor to the music. They moved with different levels of confidence and skill, following the directions of Lady Narcissa Malfoy.

It was the second lesson she was giving them, but the first in dancing. Her students were her own son, Daphne Greengrass from the same year, Harry, and Hermione.

Harry was enjoying the lessons, contrary to what he had expected. The one lesson he had had prior to this had been horrible, but this was fun, even if he felt clumsy moving Hermione around over the mosaic floor. Draco was behaving as best he was able, almost constantly battling with his habit of belittling Hermione and snapping at Harry himself. And Harry found the irritated scowl frequently making an appearance on the blond’s face highly amusing.

Narcissa Malfoy was a good teacher. She was patient and able not to be condescending to her pupils. The first lesson had been on table manners. To get to know what Hermione and Harry already knew about this, she had hosted a small dinner party. Draco and Daphne had been there as well. Harry was pretty sure that Narcissa was trying to provide her son with more opportunities to mend the fences between the two boys. It was not working, but to have the two Slytherins there had proven to be useful. Dancing with only one girl tempted him to only learn the movements to dance with her and not what was necessary to dance with a large number of different women.

Harry wished that he had had these lessons before the ball during the tournament last year. He would not have made himself into such a laughing stock if he had known how to dance then.

At the moment they were practising the waltz to some old-fashioned music played by a turntable. It was incredibly hot in the room, and Harry hoped that they would stop and rest for a while really soon.

A house-elf popped into the room, bowing to the Lady of the Manor. “Mistress is needed in the kitchen. There is some problem with delivery.”

With a wave of her wand the music stopped and she turned to the four children standing in the middle of the room. “Take a few moments to rest. Drink something and practice your conversation skills. I will be back after I have sorted this problem,” was the short and distracted instruction Mrs. Malfoy gave the teenagers on her way out.

“Bring us some lemonade,” Draco ordered the elf before he walked over to a small seating area off to the side. Shrugging, Harry followed, placing Hermione’s hand in the crook of his elbow as he had learned earlier that day.

The four of them settled down around a small, low table, taking a glass of lemonade each.

“It is much too warm for this much dancing,” Daphne said before she sipped mannerly from her cool drink.

“Well, we have too much catching up to do to be able to stop just because it is too hot,” sighed Harry, taking measured sips from his glass. The lemonade was wonderfully refreshing, and he wished he could empty his glass in a few big gulps as he would have done only a few weeks ago.
But as the heir to both the Potter and Slytherin families, he just could not behave that uncouth in public. He mentally sighed. Maybe Ron was not so far off with his fear of his changing too much.

Daphne shook her head. “I have trouble wrapping my mind around this whole story. Do you both have any time to actually have holidays this summer?”

Smiling, Harry shook his head. “Not really. Beside these lessons here, I have lessons in ancient runes, history, politics, all the stuff associated with the families – both of them…” he shrugged. “I think you both should know what that entails.” Both Draco and Daphne nodded and did not bother to hide their grimaces, they did know. “And you, Hermione, probably will learn that in the next few days. You have decided to become heiress, haven’t you?” Hermione nodded, her bushy hair bobbing with the small motion.

“All that in one summer?” Draco asked, eyes wide with doubt. “Not possible! We start learning much earlier!”

Hermione threw him an amused glare. “Just because you had more time,” she snorted. “Uncle Xerxes is determined to streamline the information for me. And I’m determined to seize this opportunity. You lot know that you are not really forthcoming with the finer points of tradition, culture, and society? And as sad as I am to admit it, this is something that one can’t learn from books.”

Silence settled over their little group while they all drank some more cold lemonade, resting their feet. Draco forced himself to stay calm and polite, looking all the while as if he was chewing on lemons. Daphne looked pensive and like she was trying to decide if she wanted to ask what was obviously on the tip of her tongue.

Amused, Hermione and Harry watched their Slytherin class-mates. It was funny that those two seemed so easy to read, almost suspiciously so. Or were they just not as closed off as they were at school?

Daphne fixed Harry with her cold blue eyes, curiosity bright in them. “Does Lord Slytherin contemplate a marriage contract for you?”

Harry blinked a few moments in shock, marriage contract? “Noo…” he answered hesitantly. Before he could formulate a more eloquent answer, Hermione had started to speak.

“Uncle Xerxes told me about this custom. He said that it is not easy to find a suitable partner for an heir or heiress. To secure someone, contracts between families were – or rather are – quite common for the old families.” Harry fixed his gaze on his very good friend. “But he told me that the new discoveries of the last weeks will probably change much of this. Because there are suddenly more possible partners.”

Thoughtfully Daphne nodded. “Astoria and Draco have a preliminary contract…” At Harry’s questioning look she explained. “A contract that can be easily dissolved if both parties wish for it,” Harry nodded to signal that he had understood. “It is harder to find someone for me. I’m heiress, so I hardly can marry an heir. And many of the families my parents would approve of only have one child, if they have a son at all.” She huffed, taking the last swallow of her lemonade, setting the glass down on the little coaster placed before her on the light wooden table. “The likelihood of finding someone not too young or too old is small, and I do not dare hope that I actually have a chance to find someone I could fall in love with.”

With a dismayed grimace Harry started to play nervously with his robe sleeves. “Until now he has
“If more, or even all, of our fellow students are related to some of the old families, the pool of candidates he would approve of,” she scoffed at the implied preference for a specific ancestry, “should grow quite a lot,” Hermione said reasonably. “Your mother was a descendant of Slytherin, after all. I do not see him forcing you together with someone you cannot stand, Harry.”

Daphne sighed a little forlornly. “I have asked father if he would think Aiden Nott was a possibility. He is a younger son and descended from an old German family. That is quite good actually. Not so closely related to the British wizarding families.”

Being forced to look at marriage from this point of view was slightly horrifying. Selecting a partner based on if he or she was a younger or the oldest child, and how closely related they were to you... it simply felt wrong. Harry rubbed his arms but kept silent, going over the implications in his mind while he listened to Hermione lecturing about contracts between married people in the muggle world. The young purebloods were slightly mystified by the acknowledged need to secure fortunes and how a marriage would be broken if certain things were to happen. Neither Draco nor Daphne had thought it possible to find something so similar to one of their upheld traditions in the Muggle world.

Harry knew from history lessons from before Hogwarts that noble families all over Europe had made a point of finding politically advantageous partners for their children. The way the old – traditionally oriented – wizarding families were going about it was close to that, only a little more restricted. They insisted on old magical families and thus had a smaller pool to choose from. Harry was of the opinion that there was nothing wrong with falling in love with a Muggle and marrying one, but taking into account that it was not allowed to talk about magic to Muggles, and the possibly perceived betrayal of keeping such a big secret for so long... That would complicate an already complicated affair – he more often than not felt mystified by girls – to a degree many might simply just avoid. Going for a witch or wizard was so much simpler, less prone to misunderstandings, with less opportunity to get hurt. Thinking of the way the Dursleys were acting around magic, Harry had to admit that it was too likely that a Muggle, learning that their spouse was a witch or wizard after they had married, would react badly. When were they even allowed to tell their partners? Knowing the Ministry, it was probably really only after they were already married. He would have to ask to be sure. Maybe that was something that had to be changed.

Their discussion was cut short as Draco’s mother returned, muttering something about substandard strawberries under her breath, and they returned to their dancing.

Sitting in a nicely padded leather chair, Marvolo sipped on his tea and leafed through the notes Xerxes had given him after showing him to the meeting room. He was waiting for the others to arrive, curious how a meeting led by another would go while he was in attendance.

Voices were drawing near. It seemed one of the others had arrived.

“I still am not sure why I’m here, Lord Lestrange,” a silky male voice drawled. That had to be Severus.
“None of that, Severus. It is Xerxes,” their host answered, scolding the younger wizard, “And as I’m planning a school, and you are the only one of us with years of teaching experience, I think it is wise to have you here.”

Marvolo assumed that Severus nodded to that because there was nothing said and a moment later both men stepped into the small dining room they would be using for this meeting.

Xerxes nodded his head to Marvolo and Severus sank down onto one of his knees.

“I will check on the elves and greet the others,” the Lord of the house explained as he was leaving the room again.

“Please rise, Severus. Take a seat,” Marvolo said and indicated a chair across from his own place at the table for Severus to take.

The Potions Master complied and watched his Lord with attentive dark eyes.

“Tell me, Severus. What is the current Hogwarts policy regarding the education of the students in matters of interactions between them?” Marvolo grimaced in the privacy of his mind. That was a rather awkward way to put it. But despite the fact that he looked like a young man in his early twenties, he was last a teenager in the early forties, and the Muggles had been rather prudish... and the wizards had not been much more open.

Thankfully Severus was a quick thinker and knew almost immediately what he wanted to know. With a slightly annoyed look the Hogwarts professor started his explanation. “I would guess that the policy has not changed much since your days at the school, my Lord. There is no lecture from the school nurse or the Heads of House. Generally it is assumed that a child’s parents will take care of informing their offspring.” It was obvious that Severus did not approve of this practice. “When I notice one of my Slytherins becoming interested in things like that, I make sure they know how to prevent unintentional pregnancy, but I’m pretty sure that I’m the only one of the Heads doing so.”

“Thank you, Severus. It seems that I will have to take care of this myself then.” And he was bemused by the feelings elicited by this prospect. He was maybe the darkest wizard ever to live. Had had done countless things others would shy away from. And now here he sat, terrified by the prospect of having to speak with his adopted son about courting, sex, and all it entailed.

The irony was not lost on him. But now was not the time to think how he would go about this task. He would contemplatet this when he was home again and alone.

And so he waited for the others to arrive, to help his friend plan his school. Another thing he had never done before and never expected he would get to do. Thankfully, this was a task he was looking forward to.

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After his Lord had stated that it would fall to him to inform the former Potter brat on the facts of life he would need to know, Severus stayed still in his chair. He was looking at his folded hands so as to not risk eye-contact with the Dark Lord. He could not take the chance that the man would pick up on his current thoughts. And with the situation as it was, Severus was not sure if he would be able to keep them hidden.
The mental images his imagination was conjuring for him were just too ridiculous to ignore. How he wished he could be a fly on the wall to witness this conversation.

Imagining the Dark Lord in the role of a father was still hard. Even if the day of the Dementor attack and the wizard's reaction, the concern Severus could see clearly in the blue eyes, had made it somewhat easier.

Seeing the man now, sitting not at the head of the table but in one of the chairs along the side, clearly thinking on how to go about this dreaded talk, was something entirely new. Severus actually was glad that he had made the decision to keep on living, to turn on Dumbledore and return to the Dark Lord’s side.

This was the way the other attendants of this meeting found the two wizards, sitting across from each other at the table, silent, both lost in their thoughts. Lucius sat next to his friend, Benjamin taking the place to the left of their Lord, the others – like Lord Greengrass – sitting down and reaching for the snacks and drinks provided by the house-elves in the middle of the table.

“Thank you all for finding time this evening to help me with a pet project of mine,” they were greeted by the owner of the house, as Xerxes Lestrange took his place at the head of the table. Severus barely refrained from rolling his eyes as some of the others tensed as someone other than their Lord sat down at the head of the table.

“Many thanks especially to you, Marvolo. I know that you have much to do.”

The Dark Lord smiled – a truly eerie sight as none of them were accustomed to any other smile than cruel ones on their Master’s face – and waved his hand as if to dismiss the thanks. “Your idea complements my plans most usefully. I’m glad if I can help you realize it.” Severus marvelled over the obvious changes in the man’s behaviour. The story that had been told, about some curse affecting his behaviour before his old body was destroyed, started to sound more plausible by the day.

“Before I start with the reason I asked you to come, let me provide you with a little background information.” The smile on the older Lestrange’s face was a little strained now as he took a sip from his tea and started to explain. “I’m sure most of you do not know that I had an older sister. She never received a letter from Hogwarts and left for the Muggle world shortly after that.”

The looks exchanged around the table made it obvious that beside the Dark Lord and Severus, no one really had known.

“After Marvolo had adopted Henry and the ancestry test revealed an existing familial connection, one of the boy's friends got curious and went to get herself tested as well.”

Interrupting his friend, Lord Nott leaned forward, turning to look at the already grey-haired wizard, astonishment clear on his face. “The Granger girl! That is the reason you finally changed the inheritance rules?”

Xerxes nodded. “That is right, Benjamin. My sister married and had a son, who is the father of Hermione.” Murmurs went around the table and Xerxes waited a moment for silence to return before he continued. “I’m of the opinion that a school for Squibs to attend so they do not feel pressured to leave our world is the best measure to keep them with us, and make sure there are no magicals born stranded among Muggles. Hermione was lucky that her parents are not afraid of magic. But we know that this is not the norm,” the older wizard stated with a slight frown on his face.
Remembering his own youth with a muggle father who had not known that the woman he had married was a witch until his son had his first bout of accidental magic, Severus had to agree. Life for more than one magical child living with Muggles had been hard. And it would continue to be.

“At the moment I plan a two-part school. Classes for younger kids – those born into magical families and those stranded in the Muggle world – and one for those children that have not enough magic of their own to attend Hogwarts.” He now had the undivided attention of all present. Each of them knew of at least one child that had not been invited to Hogwarts. Most were adults now, living somewhere in the Muggle world or on the edges of their society. Severus even remembered that he once had found a text speaking of the practice of killing Squib children. It seemed that these days were over for good.

“Let’s start with the elementary classes. Severus,” the Potions Master was addressed. “You get to see all children once they come to Hogwarts. What can you tell us about the state of education they are in then? Any advice on what we should consider for those classes?”

Happy that he actually was here for his experience, Severus started to rant his complaints he had had for years now. “Get them some decent language lessons. The number of spelling and grammatical errors is horrendous. The fact that almost none of the little dunderheads know how to structure an essay properly is just a minor inconvenience in comparison. The level of knowledge greatly varies between those that had tutors,” here Severus inclined his head in the direction of Nott and Malfoy, “those that were home-schooled, and those that were sent to a Muggle school for the young.”

“In what way do they differ?” Lucius wanted to know, his blond hair falling into his face as he leaned forward to get a better look at his friend.

“Those coming from Muggle schools and tutors mostly are competent enough. It greatly depends on whether they are dedicated enough to keep up with their studies. But those that have been home-schooled have a disadvantage if the parent teaching them is not knowledgeable enough.”

Lucius nodded and Severus could see in the faces of the others that they had no problem in following his reasoning.

“So English and mathematics are a given. I would propose a cultural class, to help the children from Muggle homes get acclimated to our culture easier and earlier than they can now.” A lot of nodding around the table signalled that they were in agreement over this.

“I thought some basics in other fields of magic – mostly those things that do not require any magic to learn – and physical activities could be other lessons to incorporate. What would you propose?” And so Xerxes opened the floor for the discussion.

Pretty soon they were engaged in a passionate discussion: what should be taught, who could be hired as teachers for single subjects, what a building would need to be acceptable as a place for the school, when schooling should start, and many details more.

Severus was actually surprised that they managed to agree on Xerxes’ suggestion to use a vehicle similar to the knight bus to collect the children from their homes in the morning and return them in the evening.

It was a rather novel experience to be discussing something productive, something that would create, and not the next raid or attack to kill, torture, and destroy. Severus enjoyed the opportunity to be involved in reforms for the early education of the magical children.
Two old friends were standing on a small street somewhere outside of Little Hangleton, looking at what remained of the shack once inhabited by the last of the Gaunts.

“And what are we doing here?” Alastor wanted to know, looking over to his companion standing by his side, his blue eyes wandering over the trees and shrubs standing around the ruin.

“Looking for something Tom has hidden here, Alastor,” Albus answered, smiling at his friend. “What do you think about the wards and other protections surrounding this run-down shack? Why would he go to all this trouble if nothing valuable was hidden here?”

The old, retired auror scoffed and let his magical eye survey the moss-covered walls, the roof that had collapsed several years ago, judging by the small trees growing inside the walls, and the grounds surrounding what maybe once had been a sound building.

“Whatever he has hidden behind these muggle-repelling wards and the notice-me-not charms, it certainly was not the building he wanted to keep safe. That’s for sure!”

Piercing blue eye roved over Albus, but he chose to ignore the silent question of his friend and ally. He had brought him for backup, not to explain how Tom had achieved a form of immortality. It was better if not too many people knew of the horcruxes and the need to find and destroy them.

“Let’s see if we can manage to get through these wards without triggering any alarms, shall we?” Albus said, his eyes twinkling merrily. It always was fun to go against another that had similar magical strength and the cunning to pose riddles to be solved. If only the boy had stayed away from the dark.

Sighing, Albus stepped forward and in concert with Alastor found a weak spot in the wards. They both came to the conclusion that the spells had been placed here several decades ago and had not been checked up on since then.

“Bloody insanity,” bellowed Alastor, not even trying to keep quite. “Why go to all this trouble to protect a place and then not return to make sure it stays protected?”

They now were inside the protective wards and fighting with the tall grass and the thistle growing in between on their way closer to the building, or more accurately, what once had been a building.

“Tom always was most assured that no one was as clever as he. I would guess he never would think another capable of even finding this place.” They reached the place where a door with an old rusty nail hung off a last remaining hinge, in danger of falling over to the ground any moment. “Let’s have a look around.”

They split up and searched the small number of rooms, or what once had been rooms. Albus wished he had foregone the robes for this endeavour, they always got tangled in one of the roofbeams or the plants covering the ground.

After a search of not more than ten minutes, Albus found a spot on the floor that had a menacing feel about it. “Alastor, I think I found it!”

Some moments and several colourful curses later, the sound of Alastor coming over – his peg leg was unique and far from silent – made Albus look up.
“Let’s see then, Albus.”

Together they moved a few wooden beams out of the way and removed some young trees until they uncovered the floorboards. Under one of them they found a small casket from precious woods with the picture of a snake on the cover.

“How careless! No additional wards. I thought he would be more vigilant!”

“If I’m right, Alastor, it is entirely possible that Tom hid this here when he was barely out of school. And when he never returned here, why should the protections be better than a young man would think of?”

A small wandless levitation charm later and the two wizards had an unimpeded view of a heavy gold ring set with a black stone that had some lines etched into it. The lines were not easy to see in the twilight under the trees inside the old ruin.

“Our work is done here,” Albus said with finality, a suspicion making itself known in the back of his mind, he would need a moment alone with the ring and better light to make sure. “Let us return to the school.”

Nodding his consent Alastor stepped back to let Albus rise, watching as his old friend waved his hand to close the lid and levitate the small casket out of its hiding place.

They took great care while leaving the place. It would be a disaster if they were to trip any alarms on their way out. Once the two wizards had left the wards behind and were once again standing on the small street that led down to the village they did not wait long before they apparated back to the border of Hogwarts.

Alastor contemplated their afternoon adventure the whole way up to the castle and the Headmaster’s office. They set the box with the ring down in the middle of the desk, first removing some of the trinkets Albus was so fond of.

“And what now, Albus?” Alastor wanted to know, sitting down in one of the visitor chairs. His leg was killing him, and his back demanded he take a break. How he longed for the days of his youth when he could duel several dark wizards for hours without getting out of breath.

“Now, I think, we should destroy this ring to break the magic that is bound to it, don’t you agree?” Was Albus’ answer, his eyes merrily twinkling.

Scoffing, Alastor flicked his wand, opening the casket and exposing the ring again. This was one of Albus’ damned secrets again. He knew the man too well to expect an explanation of any kind from him. But he would ask anyway.

“And what magic is anchored in this ring, Albus?” his magical eye was searching the small box for any hidden compartments or nasty spells.

“One of the most foul there is, my friend.”

Shaking his head, Alastor gave his friend a glare. “All your secrets will come back to bite us in the
ass, Albus!” As said wizard just kept smiling, the ex-auror shook his head. “What is needed to destroy the anchor?”

“If you could get the sword of Gryffindor from its place in the Trophy Room, I will prepare what needs to be done here.”

Highly sceptical, Alastor got up and made his way down to the room in which all awards, trophies, and other remarkable and flashy objects from Hogwarts’ long history were stored and displayed.

He was sure that Albus’ tendency to keep secrets and only tell those around him the bare minimum of information once he was forced to do so would get them all into big trouble. He himself was torn as to which was better: to keep essential information between as few people as possible, so as not to risk it getting into the wrong hands, or to share the information with all who were trustworthy, so it would not be lost.

Both ways had something he thought necessary, and both had risks. He huffed, descending the last flight of stairs, his wooden leg making clunking noises with each second step.

The sword was easy to spot and even easier to get down from its display. Hogwarts had lax security measures. No wonder there had been so many dangerous situations in the last few years! Any first-year could have wandered into the room and gotten the sword. Snorting, and with the ruby-encrusted weapon held securely in his hand, he started his way back up.

A few minutes later – it was a rather long trek from the trophy room back to the Headmaster’s office – Alastor walked in on a gruesome scene. Albus was bent over his desk, his face contorted in pain, his breathing shallow and fast, his right arm was hanging by his side, the ring on his hand, the appendage blackened. As Alastor hurried to his friend’s side he could watch as the black discoloration crept higher from the wrist towards the elbow.

“Albus, what have you done?! You idiot! You knew the ring was cursed. Get it off!” He shook Albus by his shoulders, getting him aware enough so that he was able to remove the ring again.

“Crack the stone with the sword!” gasped Albus, and Alastor complied even though he was not sure that it would help with negating the curse. And he was right, even as a new crack graced the surface of the ring, the curse did not slow down or recede.

“Get Severus,” Albus managed to say between moans of pain. So Alastor cast his patronus to send it with a message to Severus Snape. He did not like the man, but he knew more about dark magic and curses than Alastor himself, and probably they would need a Potions Master to keep Albus from dying.

After the silvery shape had left the circular office, the grey-haired and one-eyed wizard started to cast a steady string of spells to keep the Headmaster of Hogwarts alive while all the former headmasters and headmistresses watched from their portraits.

Alastor prayed to any god listening that the brat would hurry.

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The meeting was going well. They had compiled an extensive list of possible teachers for all the subjects they thought should be offered at the new school, with second and third options for most of the positions. Severus was surprised that most of the persons named were Squibs. He never realized how many of those there were in the wizarding world.

At the moment they were comparing different houses belonging to the families, which might be used to house the school. The Dark Lord already had offered to help improve wards around the school, and Lucius had offered his help in purchasing a suitable house if neither of them had one they could part with.

“I have another aspect to consider,” their Lord said and got all attention on the spot. “I tried to get the Goblins to agree for us to use the ancestry test – provided by them of course – outside of Gringotts, but they insist that they are to be performed in the bank and for children only with a legal guardian with them.”

“They let Hermione take the test without her parents being present,” Xerxes remarked, filling his cup with fresh tea.

“I’m aware. They most likely want to pressure me into accepting some outlandish conditions.” Red eyes were rolled, and Severus had to control his face so as not to blink in astonishment. The Dark Lord was acting disturbingly human.

“But I think we could actually use this to our advantage. If we could somehow incorporate a short-term orphanage into the school, then we could get cases like Aidan to safety and find out to which family they belong before they are adopted.”

Before anyone could answer to this idea or react in any way, the Dark Lord’s eyes got impossibly wide and he sank to the ground curling in on himself. Immediately all around the table wizards sprang to their feet, drawing their wands, looking wildly around them, searching for the threat.

Severus took the shortest way possible to his Lord’s side – directly over the table, crushing some of the remaining pastries – casting a quick diagnostic over him. “My Lord, can you tell me what’s wrong?” Waiting for an answer Severus went over the list of potions he had on him in his head.

“Backlash,” was the whispered answer as the most powerful dark wizard started to shake with tremors and pressed his jaw together like he was trying to prevent cries of pain.

Severus had gotten a pain reliever potion out of his pocket and had managed to get the cork out of the vial as the silvery shape of a genet ran through the wall over to Severus and spoke in the voice of Alastor Moody. “Get your sorry ass back to Hogwarts. Albus needs your help. And hurry, boy!”

Ignoring the irritating auror and his demands – what the hell went wrong this time, and why was it always him that needed to save the day? – Severus turned to his Lord again, trying to get the man to drink the pain potion. But instead of drinking the potion the Dark Lord fixed pain-filled, red eyes on his Potions Master. “Go… keep your cover… help… him…” And he added a hoarse “Go!” as he realized that Severus was about to ignore his order to stay by his side.

But this was an obvious order Severus better not ignore – the Dark Lord had been somewhat more reasonable of late, but was sure to be irritated after this – and to keep his cover and place in the Order he could not ignore this call for help.

So he stood, bowed to his Lord, who was still suffering enormous amounts of pain by the look of it, and turned to leave the room.
“Get his healer here!” Severus snapped at Lord Greengrass as he passed the man on his run out of the room and the wards. He had the feeling that the state his Lord was in and the call for help from Moody were somehow connected.

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While Severus hurried to get to Hogwarts and the Headmaster’s side, where he would spend several hours stabilizing the man by giving him potions, some of them freshly brewed, and casting wards on his hand to contain the curse from spreading further, Lestrange Manor was filled with slightly panicking Death Eaters.

Lord Greengrass had called his brother by floo after Severus’ order had shaken him from his stupor. And now the younger wizard was administering potions and casting a huge number of different healing spells in the small sitting room next to the dining room they had used as their meeting place, while the rest of them were standing fretfully in the hall, shifting from foot to foot, unsure of what they should do.

It had been twenty minutes when finally Malcolm Greengrass stepped out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him. “Our Lord is now sleeping and will be fine again by morning,” Malcolm announced, as instructed by his Lord. And by the easing of the tension that went through the room in that very moment it was clear why he had been instructed to tell them.

“Can you inform us of the cause?” Lord Malfoy wanted to know, his expensive robes crumpled and his hair in disarray.

Malcolm nodded, catching a questioning gaze from his brother and trying to reassure him with a small smile. “He thinks that someone triggered a really old protection he had placed somewhere several decades ago. It was not quite compatible with his new body, and there was an odd reaction because of this. As I said, he will be fine by morning. There is no reason to worry.”

It seemed that they all felt better to know this, and Xerxes took charge of the situation, sending the others home, asking them to remember the things they wanted to research.

While the group broke up into several smaller groups of quietly speaking wizards, the healer walked over to Lords Nott and Malfoy. “Our Lord instructed me to tell you that his son Henry shall stay with either of you for the night.”

The blond and the brunette looked at each other. “Our Lord’s heir is certainly more comfortable in your home, Benjamin,” Lucius said, casting a charm to straighten his robes out.

“You are right, Lucius. But is he not at the moment at your house, getting instruction on dancing from your wife?” Benjamin answered, taking the customary steps in the dance, trying to get the advantage of housing their Lord’s heir in a situation of distress. An opportunity to prove loyalty and competence, as well as establish some sort of accord with the boy. But as it would have seemed uncouth to just grab the boy and keep him – figuratively speaking – they had to make it seem as if they felt not worthy of the honour, encouraging the other to take on the task, even if they wanted to have the honour.

Malcolm scoffed in the privacy of his mind. He was so happy that he was not the oldest son. Having to work this way all the time because he was Head of his House and sitting in the
Wizengamot… no, he much preferred his work as a healer.

“I think a known environment, like his old guest room in your house, Lord Nott, would be best. I can provide a calming draught that works well with his other potions,” Malcolm intervened. If he did nothing of the sort, this delicate manoeuvring could take hours.

“Very well,” Lord Malfoy conceded, turning back to Lord Nott. “Benjamin. If you would accompany me, then you can inform our Lord’s heir and take him to your house.”

Late in the afternoon the young witches and wizards had to pause in their dancing lesson. Harry had developed a severe case of migraine Hermione suspected of being caused by something connected to the one man she had trouble naming in her head. Should she keep with the ridiculous habit of calling him You-Know-Who, call him Voldemort as the Headmaster insisted they do, or go with Lord Slytherin as would be proper considering tradition?

Regardless of what she would call him, Hermione remembered too well the few things Harry had told her and Ron last year, how he felt it when Voldemort – there was no question who the wizard had been back then – had had strong emotions. And the few times in their first year Harry had complained about odd pains in his scar. She was concerned this was somehow like that.

As the pain potion Lady Malfoy had an elf fetch did nothing to ease the pain, Hermione was almost convinced that her suspicion was right.

Finally Harry recovered somewhat, drinking some water, as Lord Malfoy came home accompanied by Lord Nott and her uncle Xerxes. Her friend immediately stood from the settee the Lady of the house had forced him to sit on earlier, walking over to the three Lords.

“What happened?” Harry demanded to know, his green eyes sparking with determination to get an answer.

A part of Hermione – the part that did not dare question her teachers, or what was written in books – waited for the adults to brush Harry off, maybe even scold him for his disrespectful question. But the bigger part of her – the part questioning everything, the part that had been growing for years now – was not surprised as the men only exchanged glances until Lord Nott bowed his head in Harry’s direction and started an explanation. “It seems some old protection your father had placed somewhere in the past, was breached today and caused some sort of backlash. Healer Greengrass is sure that Lord Slytherin will be recovered by morning. Your father asked that you stay with one of us,” here the dark-haired Lord in his light summer robes indicated Lord Malfoy and himself, “for the night, Henry.”

“If it is all the same to you, Lord Malfoy,” Harry said with a proper small bow in the blond’s direction, “I would prefer to stay at Nott Manor for the night.”

Slowly picking up on the subtleties of the interactions between the old magical families, Hermione noticed the sour expression on Lord Malfoy’s face as he responded. “You are free to choose the place you feel more comfortable to stay, Heir Slytherin-Potter.” And she noticed the difference in address, smiling to herself at the obvious lower esteem the Malfoys had in Harry’s eyes.

“I will take you back to your parents, Hermione,” Xerxes addressed her, smiling. And she answered
with a smile of her own. “Thanks, Uncle Xerxes.”

The teenagers said their farewells and Harry assured Hermione with a look and a small nod that he would inform her of what he knew as soon as they had less of an audience.

They parted, hoping to meet soon again.

On the way up from the entrance hall to get to bed, Marvolo quietly stepped into Henry’s room.

It had been a long day and a long week. He just was back from the house he had made his headquarters, receiving a report from his auror who was working on the investigation of the Dementor attack, and felt the need to check on his son.

Looking into the room bathed in the light of the waning moon, Marvolo spotted the art supplies spread over his son’s desk. The therapy seemed to do the boy some good, but only time would tell how far the help could go. One effect it had had was obvious though. Henry had uncovered an urge to express himself through art. And as long as his son did not slack off in his studies, Marvolo saw no reason to hinder the boy. Therefore they had made a small trip to Muggle London on Friday – Marvolo had found much amusement in Henry’s reaction to their destination – buying different colours and media so Henry could experiment and find the medium he wanted to use. Several sketches and attempts with oil paint, different kinds of pencils and crayons, and water colours were littered over the desk, almost hiding a potions essay beneath them. Taking a few steps into the room, Marvolo spotted a sketch of a huge black dog, one of a hatching dragon, and one of a centaur, on top of the piles.

The silvery moonlight on his son’s peaceful face directed Marvolo’s thoughts back to the happenings of Thursday that week. The night of the full moon, and the day Dumbledore had destroyed another of Marvolo’s horcruxes.

Looking back, the young Dark Lord was happy that he had finished the last touches on the wards surrounding Potter Manor a few days early. This way Remus Lupin had had the promised safe place to roam in. The day after, once Marvolo and the werewolf had recovered, they had met and agreed that this arrangement – the potion brewed by Severus combined with the place to run free in without risking harm to anyone, not even himself – was satisfactory to both of them.

That was the nicer part of the outcome from that day, along with the planning they had accomplished for Xerxes’ school project. But being forced to reabsorb a part of his soul, because another horcrux had been destroyed, that had been unpleasant. More than unpleasant, if he was honest with himself.

Severus’ show of loyalty had been nice, and to learn that the ring had been the one destroyed had been valuable. But to know that Albus Dumbledore now was walking around a dead man, that had given him some satisfaction. At the moment he was unsure if he should offer to lift the curse – as the one who had placed it on the ring he was able to – but he was still contemplating it. He already planned to tell the Minister that someone had stumbled into a trap he had laid while he had been under that blasted curse which had made him into Voldemort. Best to place the pieces so he could spin the story the way he wanted and not let the Headmaster of Hogwarts get the upper hand.
Next week he planned to check on the other horcrux he could reach. As one was hidden at Hogwarts and another in a vault he had no legal access to – not one of his smarter moves to hide them there – only the one he had hidden in that cave by the sea, was available to him. He would take the traitor with him so he would not have to take a house elf again. The last time he had not truly known the value of those little creatures to the families they were serving, a traitor was much less valuable and he would greatly enjoy exposing the former Headmaster of Durmstrang to the ingenious little potion guarding the locket.

He would need to find a way to get the other two back under his direct influence and hide them better. What use was there in a prestigious hiding place if others could get access more easily than he? The diadem he might be able to pick up once Henry was back at Hogwarts. Maybe he would visit during one of the quidditch games. After all, his son was Seeker for the Gryffindor team. Was it not something natural for parents to want to watch their children doing sports?

The one he had entrusted to Bella was a bigger problem. Bella was in Azkaban, and he had no real plans to get her out of there. Even if he felt slightly guilty about that. Marvolo huffed, frustrated, and took the last few steps up to Henry’s bed, adjusting the light blanket that had almost fallen to the floor. With the last bit of soul that he had regained, he had gotten another boost of emotions. And feeling guilty because he had no intention of getting those followers of his who had gotten themselves caught and thrown into Azkaban – by their own stupid actions, he might add – was just something so out of character for him. He had not felt guilty in a very, very long time.

In fact, he had trouble remembering a time before that he had ever felt guilty. He smiled down at his son as the raven-haired boy mumbled something unintelligible, turning over and tossing the blanket away again, reassured that his son and heir was well. Maybe he felt a little guilt because those that were incarcerated had been loyal to him, acting on his wishes faithfully for long years before his fall. Beside his Death Eaters, no one had ever acted this way for him before. Maybe some form of obligation from the Lord to his vassals was the root of this unfamiliar sensation.

Nodding to himself, Marvolo left the room to go to his own. This was actually a reasonable explanation. Now he only needed to find a way to quench this feeling of guilt. Maybe he could get the cases re-examined? He had to think about it.

The state of the investigation into who had tried to kill his son made Marvolo angry and frustrated. Dawlish had been trembling in his boots as he was reporting on what he and Kingsley, who belonged to the Order as Severus had informed him, had accomplished. Shaking his head in exasperation on how anyone could think sorting charms would work on files that were spelled against direct summoning, Marvolo closed the door to his rooms behind him. He got out of his robe and stepped into his bathroom to start on his nightly ablutions. It was beyond his understanding how a head of a department could be this ignorant about charms theory and spellcrafting. Of course the state of the file room and archives made the work for the aurors that much harder and they had not managed to find the order yet. They had taken to spending a few hours each day helping those ministry workers trying to sort through the mess, and the rest of the day going after witnesses and checking possible motives. Sadly, there were a lot of people that would like to harm him, any of the other Lords whose heirs were targeted, or Henry himself.

Probably the most dangerous fallout from the attack was that some of the bleeding hearts at the Ministry had gotten to see the report from St. Mungo’s and were now demanding that the Dementors be banished for good. On the few short trips to the Ministry to speak with the Minister and give his statement to the aurors on who he thought capable of wanting to harm his son, Marvolo had heard rumours that some people thought it was safer to remove the Dementors from Azkaban in the event he, that is, Lord Slytherin, would try to break his followers out. A foolish idea. But regrettably one that might actually go through. No one liked Dementors. And all those
ears he had listening to rumours and gossip, reported that the atmosphere was in favour of getting rid of the guards of Azkaban for good.

Marvolo sighed. Thankfully the estate of House Potter was mostly ordered now, and he had made the investments he had planned on to build up a Slytherin estate again. Maybe he could sell the ground the Gaunt shack was standing on, or maybe he could build a real house there?

Slipping under his blankets into his bed next to a sleeping Nagini, Marvolo began clearing his head. He had to be careful not to get too involved in too many things at once. It would not do to lose control of the most important jobs that had to be done, because he got sidetracked into less important but more exciting tasks.

Only minutes later the Dark Lord was asleep. It had been an emotionally exhausting week.

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Back in Harry’s room, the teenager lay awake staring at the ceiling over his bed. He had woken because it was too warm all of a sudden, and as he realized that someone had tucked him in and was now leaving the room, he had been stunned.

Marvolo, also known by the name of Lord Voldemort, had come into his room, checked on him, and tucked him in. Why would the man do so? Was he concerned that Harry would try to run away? That he would strangle himself with his blankets? Harry snorted and green eyes were closed again.

He was glad that Marvolo was well again. As the man’s pain had hit the teenager that awful day, he had started to panic. Only after the meeting with his mind healer the day after did he understand why it had happened. Not because of the pain or fear for himself, but because he somehow had managed to get attached to Marvolo.

He was pretty sure he would not tell anyone any time soon that he had begun to like the man who had adopted him without asking for his opinion first. Or that he had started to separate this man with the wavy brown hair and his dark red eyes from the man with the pale skin and missing nose that had killed his parents. The latter had been a monster, but Marvolo seemed like a human being.

With all his tumultuous thoughts, Harry was glad that Severus had cancelled the Occlumency lesson in favour of another potion-brewing session, because of the mental strain the teenager had had to endure.

Clearing his mind as Snape demanded he do every night before going to sleep, Harry folded the blanket down to prevent getting too warm again and slipped into a restful sleep soon after.

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Sidestepping the other patrons in Diagon Alley, Severus made his way from the Leaky Cauldron to Slug & Jiggers Apothecary as he did every year at about this time. While Pomona grew quite a bit of the ingredients needed in the student's potions, most of the animal parts and many of the more fickle plants, and those ingredients that needed to be pre-processed – like essences and dried plant parts – Severus had delivered to the school. And in his opinion Slug & Jiggers were the best. The quality and freshness, as well as the reliability of their delivery, were better than those of any apothecary he had tried in the past.

Today he needed some things for his own experimental potions, and those he was brewing for the Dark Lord too. After he had cancelled the Occlumency lesson for his Lord’s son on his orders, Severus had found the time to make good progress on the two-fathers-potion. At the end of the last week – it was Monday the fourteenth today – Severus had informed his Master of his progress, and the man had promised to select a couple matching the requirements the Potions Master had requested for the first trial. In fact, three persons would be needed for this first real test of the potion: the two prospective fathers, and a woman who would carry the child. Considering that Severus had determined that the best time to administer the potion would be the time the woman was in the middle of her cycle, it would take some planning, and the 'when' was yet to be determined.

He was rather excited over the prospect of finishing the creation of such a unique and powerful potion.

Reaching his destination, Severus stepped into the fragrant air of the apothecary, looking around for Mr. Jiggers, the lone owner of the shop since Mr. Slug had died in an accident some years ago, without children or other family to inherit his part of the business.

As he could not spot the stout man, Severus went over to the counter, addressing a woman a few years younger than he, who was working there on some books. “Excuse me, Miss, may I speak to Mr. Jiggers?”

“My father is not in the shop today, Mr....?” the young woman answered, lifting her brown eyes from the neat columns of numbers she had written in the ledger lying on the counter before her.

“Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master at Hogwarts. I am here to arrange for the delivery of ingredients for the next term. Are you authorized to make such arrangements, or do I have to come back another day?” Curiosity overpowered the small threat of resentment over the possibility that he would have to come back again. Who was this woman?

Her hair was a dark honey colour, her eyes brown and sparkling. She was wearing some sturdy orange robes over a dark green skirt and a cream-coloured tunic. Sensible and nice-looking clothes, a combination Severus did not get to see often.

“As Father wants me to take over the business in the near future, I have the full authority to make decisions and sign contracts.” She closed the book and ink well before standing from the chair. “Will you come back into the office with me, Professor Snape?”

“That sounds like a reasonable idea, Miss Jiggers,” Severus agreed, inclining his head and
following her billowing robes into the office.

“Martin! Please mind the shop, while I speak to Professor Snape,” the young co-owner instructed one of the helpers re-stocking one of the shelves as they walked past him.

“Will do, Miss.”

The office looked the same as it had always done: Dusty old ledgers standing on a big shelf on one wall, a desk covered in paperwork next to the door, a few worn-out leather chairs grouped around the small table that was used for meetings like the one they were about to have.

“Take a seat, Professor. Do you want a cup of tea? Or water maybe?” the young woman offered.

“A glass of water, please.” It was a little too warm to drink tea, at least for Severus.

As they settled down, Miss Jiggers going over to a small sideboard to get two glasses and a pitcher of water on a tray, Severus started on the customary small talk. “Did you attend Beauxbatons? I do not remember you as one of my students. There was a Mr. Jiggers a few years back. Your brother?”

She settled the tray on the table and poured Severus a glass, which he accepted with a polite nod. “That was my older brother, yes. And no, I went to Wycombe Abbey School and later studied accounting at London School of Economics and Political Science.” Her tone was challenging, daring him to comment on the fact that she had not attended one of the magical academies but had gone to a muggle school and university.

Blinking in surprise and masking his delay in response by sipping from his water, Severus tried to compose himself enough not to offend the daughter of one of his most frequent business contacts. “These are both prestigious institutions. I guess you finished your studies not so long ago?”

Her surprised look – that was quickly masked behind polite indifference – convinced the Potions Master that he had succeeded in not showing any negative reaction to her declaring herself a Squib in a roundabout way.

Before the Dark Lord and Lord Lestrange had started to have a closer look at Squibs, Severus had never realized how many there really were. He had of course known of Mr. Filch, the caretaker, and Mrs. Figg, the kneazle breeding old lady, but obviously the families were really good at hiding their shameful offspring away from the rest of their community. And, he noted to himself, most of them most likely elected to vanish into the Muggle world instead of lingering in the shadows of the wizarding world.

“What is your brother up to these days? I have not heard from him since his graduation. I do not even remember your father mentioning him, Miss Jiggers.” He took another sip from his water. There had to be a cooling charm on the jug, as the water was pleasingly cool.

“John was never really interested in the business, he preferred wandering around the woods. Father is a little disappointed with him and his adventurous streak. But John is of the opinion that he can contribute by finding rare animals, creatures, and plants on his travels to sell in the shop.” She quickly regained her composure and smiled charmingly, redirecting their conversation back to the deliveries they were here to organize.

“Professor Snape, shall we go over the ingredients you want to have delivered to the school and when?”

And so they started to talk plans and dates, quantities and variants, coming to an agreement over what should be delivered when to Hogwarts for the Potions lessons.
Before Severus left he got the things he needed for his experiments. Finally he exited the apothecary in particular good spirits. He had been worried that Mr. Jiggers would have to sell his shop and he would have had to get used to another person heading the business, or changing the apothecary he bought his ingredients at. Now it seemed that his daughter would continue to run the shop just as her father did. A nice surprise indeed.

With a spring in his step, Severus walked back to the Leaky Cauldron, flooing back to the school to give the delivery plans to the house-elf that helped him keep the storeroom in order. After that, he had plans to spend the afternoon brewing.

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Cleansing his brush on a large cloth, and then, with a special spell he had found in a little book about magic in art, Harry cleaned up his current working space. In a few moments Professor Snape would arrive to give Harry his first real Occlumency lesson. He had been nervous the entire morning, alerting his guardian to the fact with his endless fidgeting. The man had paused in his lecture about some odd, long-abandoned customs related to the turn of the year to suggest he find something to do to calm down.

Harry had decided to try using the oil paints and had found the experience quite calming indeed. He had created somewhat of an abstract piece, blending different colours together to create something resembling the effect of summer light through leaves.

With a last glance over his shoulder – maybe he could get it to glow somehow – Harry left his room, casting a preserving charm at his palette, walking down to the school room.

“Mr. Slytherin, I hope you are well rested after that attack of migraine last week,” drawled the Potions Master as he entered the room with billowing dark green robes, only moments after Harry had taken his seat in the room.

“I’m all better now, Sir,” nodded Harry, standing beside his desk, his hands clasped behind his back in a mannerly fashion.

“Then let us begin.” Snape waved for Harry to take a seat and leant against the teacher’s desk, crossing his arms and ankles. His manner was businesslike and his expression serious. “We will begin today to subject your mind to the intrusion of Legilimency. There really is no other way to build shields against this art or to learn to recognize the intrusion.”

Harry sat down and contemplated that it probably was easier to learn Legilimency over Occlumency, because to practice reading minds, one only needed another human. Developing skill in defending against a Leglimens required one to actually attack.

“I must reiterate that I will most likely come to see your thoughts and memories, especially those you want me to see the least.” Snape threw him a pointed look. Swallowing nervously Harry nodded that he understood.

Pushing away from the desk, picking up a chair on his way over to where Harry was sitting, the Potions Master walked calmly over. He sat on his chair opposite from Harry, giving the teen a long calculating look. “Do you know why your adoptive father wants me to teach you Occlumency? I feel it is not only to protect you from the Headmaster’s attempts to fish for information from your
Harry had wondered what Marvolo had told the professor about why Harry had to learn to protect his mind. And it seemed that Snape had been told next to nothing. A hint that Marvolo was using the Death Eaters as he always had, despite his seemingly changed behaviour. Remembering stories that had been told to him about what Death Eaters had done in the past – mostly it had been rumours exchanged between the students at the end of the last school year, and stories the Weasley twins had told the short time Harry had stayed at Grimmauld Place – Harry guessed that some of them maybe needed someone to control them. Dismissing this train of thought – jumping to conclusions from only biased information that was spotty at best was not a habit he should keep up – Harry focused back on his teacher.

Green eyes looked thoughtful. “I know why I have to learn. But if you were not told, sir, he likely does not want you to know.” There was an awkward pause. “I’m sorry, sir.”

Taking a deep breath, dark limp hair swung forward with a short nod as the professor got out his wand from the holster hidden in his right sleeve. “For the moment, I want you to try and hold a meditative state while I will enter your mind and have a look at the surface. Try to keep calm and recognize my presence. You should learn to see the influence a Legilimens exerts over the mind, pulling forward what he is searching for. Countering those attempts will be the next step, followed by blocking access completely.”

Harry only nodded, his mouth dry with nervousness. Falling into the now familiar pattern of the breathing exercises, Harry cleared away all the stray thoughts, concentrating on his image of pulling up weeds in the front garden of his aunt’s house.

Green eyes met dark ones and the Potions Master spoke “Legilimens” in his silky smooth voice. At first Harry felt nothing different until suddenly he lost control over the image he was seeing. First he began to feel the ache from working in the garden for hours, then suddenly memories of him pruning the roses, mowing the lawn, being taunted by Dudley while working under the blistering sun started to rush past his mind's eye. But as fast and unexpected as it had started it stopped again. Slumping back in his chair Harry pinched his eyes closed and rubbed at his temples. He was starting to get a headache.

“Not bad for a first attempt,” Snape stated rather neutrally from his place only an arm's reach from Harry. “You will need to work on detaching all emotions you have to your chosen image. It was rather easy to find strong enough emotions to follow them to memories. Once that is managed, other areas of the mind will be easier to access.”

Nodding again – it did sound not too outlandish – Harry sat up straighter, meeting the eyes of his teacher with determination.

“Take a few moments to regain a calm mind again, Mr. Slytherin,” Snape said waving his wand to get a glass of water to float over from the teacher’s desk.

Harry emptied the glass with thirsty gulps, only belatedly remembering to thank the professor for getting him something to drink.

They repeated the same exercise a few more times, until the professor decided that it was enough for their first lesson of this kind. A little disappointed that he had not managed to feel the intrusion or stop the popping up of memories somehow connected to the garden at Privet Drive and all the
work he had done there, Harry was glad, nonetheless, that they had stopped, as he had started to have a rather nasty headache.

He was sent to rest for an hour, receiving a pain-relief potion from the Potions Master, and went to do just that after thanking his teacher with a little bow. They were to meet again next week to continue.

It was really bad luck that Harry would not have much of a holiday this year. Now Snape had added another exercise for Harry to practice every day at all times of day, whenever he had a moment to do so. Even with it being his OWL year, Harry got the feeling that being back at Hogwarts might be more relaxing than being at Griffin House here in London.

Severus sat back in his chair, following the teenager with his gaze. It was a rather promising start for one so young, beginning to learn to occlude his mind.

He shuddered, thinking how easy it would be to slam through the flimsy beginning shield and dig for the most embarrassing memories he could find, and how likely it would have been what he would have done had he been asked to teach the child before he had been made aware of the treatment Henry Slytherin-Potter had been subjected to.

The memories he had seen heavily hinted at mistreatment. At least they should have dispelled the image of the pampered prince. But if Severus was honest with himself, his grudge for all things Potter probably would have made it impossible for him to see the truth.

He sighed. There was no use in brooding over what-ifs and maybes. Severus stood and made his way over to the study his Lord was waiting in. He had a report to give and intended to do so in a timely manner. There was a potion waiting to be finished in his lab at Spinner’s End.

After knocking and being called in, Severus opened the door, taking a step into the room and sinking down on one knee, the door closing behind him directed by magic. Severus listened to a quill scratching over parchment, his eyes trained to the floor.

He did not have to wait long until he heard an inkwell being closed and parchment shuffled around. “Please get up and take a seat, Severus,” The Dark Lord said, sounding a little distracted. Not waiting for the order to be repeated – even with his sanity restored, it was not a good idea to annoy the Dark Lord – Severus rose from his position on the floor, one knee protesting the treatment, and walked the last steps over to one of the visitor chairs.

“Do you want something to drink? Lemonade or tea, maybe?” Red eyes rose from sorting the desk to watch the Potions Master.

“A lemonade would be most appreciated, my Lord,” Severus answered the question, inclining his head respectfully. Normally he would prefer tea, but it had been a rather hot summer so far, and it did not look as if it would get cooler any time soon.

A few minutes later they sat in two wingback chairs near the cold fireplace, facing each other, each with a glass of ice-cold lemonade in hand. “How did the first lesson go?”

“Considering his age, my Lord, it went as well as I thought it would,” Severus answered keeping
his tone even. He sipped from the excellent homemade lemonade.

“Will Henry be proficient enough by the start of term?” the Dark Lord wanted to know.

Severus sighed again. What would ‘proficient’ stand for in this context? “Will he need to be able to lie to an expert Legilimens? In addition to blocking the link between you, my Lord?”

Startled, the Dark Lord fixed Severus with wide crimson eyes. “No… I do not think it will be necessary for him to lie. It will be enough for him to recognize invasion. If he learns to block his mind – and not necessarily in a subtle way either – later, that would be good enough.”

Raising a brow, Severus nodded and contemplated his suspicions for the reasons. There was something more going on, that much was obvious. And that the Dark Lord was not inclined to share what was happening was obvious as well. Severus never had heard of this kind of link forged between two minds.

“I have another topic to discuss.” The younger-looking wizard with his aristocratic features changed the subject of their conversation. “I have talked to the Minister and tried to make as many people as possible aware of the fact that someone tripped some old – dangerous – protections I had set.” A hard stare bore into Severus’ eyes. “Am I right to assume that Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore has been cursed?”

“You are, my Lord.”

“Considering that the wizarding world is not currently mourning the defeater of Grindelwald, I guess you were able to contain the curse for the moment?”

Severus nodded, draining his lemonade and setting the glass down on a small side table.

“Make sure he knows that I offer to lift the curse. No favours owed, no strings attached. It simply needs to be known that I have changed and am trying to help.” A small evil smirk graced the young face.

Severus nodded again. It still was not easy to read the Dark Lord. The evil, sadistic madman had been rather easy to read compared to the young-looking, smiling Lord Slytherin sitting across from Severus.

“Please inform the Headmaster of my offer.” The Dark Lord sighed. “I will finish some more paperwork.”

Recognizing the dismissal, Severus stood, bowed, and left the study, walking straight out of the wards to apparate back to his own home.

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Wednesday the same week, there was to be another Order meeting. Albus carefully let the sleeve of his robin-egg-blue robes fall over his blackened hand. Severus had done a wonderful job containing the curse to the hand. Preventing it from spreading as fast as it was meant to do, giving the ageing Headmaster maybe another year to live. He sighed, sinking down into his chair, waiting for the others to arrive.
Molly and Arthur were the first, quickly followed by all the others, Severus bringing up the rear as he was prone to do. Molly started to distribute the cookies she had brought, always doing her best to lighten the mood and make them all feel at home.

Smiling with the customary twinkle in his eyes, amused over the dark blue robes Severus was wearing – he would really like to know what had caused his Potions Master to give up on his all-black colour scheme – Albus opened the meeting. “Thank you all for coming here today. Even if Voldemort seems to be laying low, we cannot cease to be vigilant,” more than one pair of eyes shifted to look at Alastor at that little barb, “if we want to have any hope at thwarting his plans.”

Albus turned to those working at the Ministry, as he had suspicions that Tom’s plans were based on his spies there. “What can you tell us? Any rumours or odd happenings of late?”

Arthur nodded, his receding red hair shining in the late afternoon summer light shining through the dusty windows. “There is a rumour going around the departments. More of a request to keep our eyes open, in fact. Lord Slytherin has told the Minister, so it is said, that last week someone tripped some old protections he had placed somewhere. Supposedly there was a curse attached to that protection. All are looking out for someone that was recently cursed.”

Tonks spoke up from the other end of the long table. “The same story is told among the aurors. Lord Slytherin reportedly wants to lift the curse and hopes that whoever tripped the wards comes forward so he can help in time.”

Albus felt a little off-kilter. What was Tom up to? How did he know that there had been someone on the property and near the ring? Had they tripped a ward on their way in or out? Alastor’s lone blue eye met with Albus’ own across the table. The old auror obviously shared his old friend's curiosity. What had gone wrong? And was the offer of help, of lifting the curse, genuine?

The others began debating among themselves. Wondering what Lord Slytherin was up to. If he was seriously planning to lift the curse, and who might have tripped the protections. Albus tried to catch Severus’ eye. Maybe his spy did know something. After several moments of futile efforts, the Headmaster finally made eye contact with the Potions Master, and he just knew that Severus was aware that it had been him tripping the protection and getting cursed.

With a slight widening of his eyes, Albus realized that Tom had probably felt something as they had destroyed the horcrux. That that was why he knew that someone had been there. Only, how he had known that the curse placed on the ring had affected him was still not clear.

“Severus, my boy, do you know something new?” The debate instantly ended. They all wanted to hear from their only spy, so they turned to look at him.

“Mr. Potter is still fine, almost constantly in lessons as far as I can tell.” Severus started with the part of his report he always told them first. “Last week there was a meeting to plan a school. It was organized by Lord Lestrange, and I was invited because of my teaching experience. The Dark Lord experienced some pain and claimed it to be backlash from some protection spells he had put up somewhere. As far as that goes, the story seems plausible.”

“A school?” Dedalus Diggle wanted to know. “A school for dark wizards?”

Severus shook his head and looked like he wanted to roll his eyes, but could just refrain from doing so. “A school for young children, and for those that have not enough magic to attend Hogwarts. The Dark Lord wants Squibs to stay, and Lord Lestrange wishes for the same.”

After that the meeting got lost in details and technicalities. Severus was pestered to explain why
there suddenly was interest in keeping Squibs from leaving.

More than once Albus had to steer the conversation away from dangerous topics. He felt his grip on the members of the Order of the Phoenix slip. Tom and his odd behaviour brought only confusion to the ranks. It had been a long time since he had felt this frustrated.

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On their way out of the old building in Godric's Hollow, the aurors Tonks and Kingsley, as well as the Weasleys, Hestia Jones, and Remus Lupin fell back behind the others, slowing to a standstill before leaving the property and the wards surrounding it.

“How have you fared this full moon, Remus?” Hestia asked, concern evident in her voice. Remus felt grateful that his fellow order members cared so much for him, but sometimes it was hard that they all seemed to expect him to tell them all how he felt. It almost was like he had no privacy.

Smiling reassuringly to the others standing around him, Remus replied, trying to set their minds at ease, “Severus brews the potion for me, and wards have been placed around Potter Manor’s grounds so I can run free there. I’m fine.”

Molly looked sceptical. “And Severus brews it out of the goodness of his own heart? Those ingredients are pricey, are they not?”

“They are, Molly,” Remus nodded, “but the potion is part of my payment for tutoring Harry in history. So the costs are carried by Lord Slytherin.”

“Why do you think Albus deflected all attempts to speak about those rumours around the werewolf legislation?” Hestia wanted to know, and Remus nodded in agreement, he had wondered the same. But with the debt he owed the Headmaster for helping him attend Hogwarts, and the job as professor, he had not dared to ask during the meeting.

“Sirius told me about the political actions to change the current laws that have been set in motion. Lord Slytherin seems to be the one leading the movement, and Umbridge is the one leading the opposition.” Only too glad to steer the conversation away from his own person and his health, Remus added his own information to this new path of thought.

“He seems changed. Doesn't he?” Arthur asked of no one in particular. “Why does Professor Dumbledore still want us to keep such a close watch?”

“Albus knows best, Arthur,” Molly almost growled. “That is the man that sent Death Eaters to kill my brothers! That is the one that killed Lily and James! Only because he hides it better now, does not mean that he isn't still a monster! I agree with the Headmaster, we need to keep an eye on him and make sure his plans fail.”

Silent in the face of the real grief of Molly Weasley for her two brothers who had been killed in the last war, no one continued to question if Lord Slytherin and the one called the Dark Lord by his followers were the same man. Remus silently went his own way, apparating back to London and Grimmauld Place, thinking about what he knew thus far.

Lord Slytherin certainly managed to behave decently most of the time. Harry looked healthier now than after the summer when Remus had been professor at Hogwarts. There had been no unexpected
deaths or missing people, if he did not count Igor Karkaroff, who might be only hiding. There were political moves being made to improve the situation for werewolves and Squibs. He had only Albus Dumbledore’s word that the pupil he had taught, who had become He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, had been a sociopath as a child.

Shaking his head and walking through the door, Remus wondered if he ever would get all the information he needed to make a sound judgement of the situation. All he knew now could indicate that the story told to all wizarding Britain, of a cursed object somewhere in a far off land, could be right and Tom Marvolo Riddle, Lord Slytherin, was a man with good intentions.

“Sirius, I’m back!” The only really important thing at the moment was to make sure Harry was safe and happy.

The head of his friend poked around a door. “Did you have to wake the old harridan?” Sirius spoke over the wailing of the late Lady Black, maybe it had not been his smartest idea to call out to announce his return.

With a sigh the both of them started to draw the curtains back over the portrait. They had to find a way to get rid of her, they really did.

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Severus stayed after all the others had gone, following a silent request from Albus. Only the three of them, Albus, Alastor, and Severus, remained.

“How does he know of the curse, my boy?” Albus asked, patiently watching the young man who had come begging at his feet so many years ago.

“Moody’s Patronus barked into the meeting, planning the school,” Severus sneered at the ex-auror. “There was no way he could not know after that call for help. He actually told me to go and save you.”

Alastor slammed his hand on the table in frustration, taking a deep breath to calm down somewhat. “Do you think his offer is genuine? Is he able to lift this curse?”

Albus raised his hands, trying to placate his friend. “Have you told him about my condition?”

With a shake of his head the dark-haired wizard answered in the negative. “I didn’t need to. He already knew what would happen. He only wanted to know if I had been able to slow it down. I confirmed that I indeed managed that.”

Dark eyes gave the Headmaster a long, searching look.

“I was ordered to convey the offer to lift the curse. No strings attached. His words, not mine.”

Albus stood from his chair and started to wander around in the room, contemplating the conundrum before him. Curses like the one now troubling him were designed to kill fast and not be lifted. Only Severus’ vast knowledge of potions and the dark arts was what had rescued him in time. If not for the young wizard, Albus would long be dead. If someone were able to lift the curse, it would be the man casting it in the first place. But it could be a trap. Maybe Bill could have a look at his hand and tell him if it was even possible to lift the curse.
“It looked to me like you wanted to keep your state a secret for the moment.”

“You are quite right, Severus, my boy. At the moment it would only cause undue concern if my impending death was well known.” Nodding solemnly, Albus smiled at his spy. “If there is nothing else of importance, please do not let me keep you from your experiments.”

Severus nodded to both older wizards and left as silently as he had entered the room.

“I don’t trust him, Albus,” Alastor growled behind his friend’s back as the door had long closed behind Severus Snape.

“There is no reason to be so suspicious, Alastor. Since Tom killed Lily Potter – no... since he set his eyes on her and her family – Severus has been on the side of the Light. And there is nothing in this world that could make this man waver in his resolve.”

Albus could see clearly that his old friend was not convinced, but maybe that was for the best. One of them should have a close watch on Severus. Just in case. The man was a Slytherin after all, even if Albus long since had felt that they might be sorting the children too early.

Wearing robes heavily charmed to be repellent to water and everything else, as well as stand up to wear and tear, Marvolo walked through the halls of his headquarters down to the old cellars that had been refashioned into cells.

He finally had found an afternoon to go check up on the locket. While Henry was in his lessons – ancient runes at Nott House with Theodore and Miss Granger, followed by dancing and proper manners at Malfoy Manor – he would have time to fetch his traitor, check on the locket, and afterwards rid himself of some of his stress.

Reaching the old wine cellar Igor was currently contained in, Marvolo gave the man a once-over. Malcolm had worked well, even if he was weakened greatly, a shell of his former self, he was healthy enough to live several years further.

“Igor! Get up, traitor! You will accompany me on an outing today!” Marvolo said in a cruel, cheerful tone. Flinching, Igor obeyed, getting to his feet. His robes were filthy and tattered. He showed all the signs of having been tortured several times. The former High Master did not raise his eyes from the floor and stumbled after the Dark Lord up from the cellars to the ground floor, where the wards allowed for apparating. At least if one was the Dark Lord.

Moments later they reappeared on a nice small ledge only a few feet above the water. Conjuring a small rowing boat – he did not intend to swim through the passageway – Marvolo let his eyes rove over the open sea. Not spotting any fishermen, he pushed Igor into the boat. “Row!” He could cast an Imperius on the man, but seeing him tremble in fear was much more enjoyable.

It was easy to overcome the protections he had placed here. They were still in place. But as he had set them to be reset if someone managed to get through them – he had thought it would be nice to add to the army resting in the lake – that was no indicator that no one had been here. In hindsight it was not one of his better ideas. He had obviously had quite a few of those not-quite-brilliant ideas
in the last years before his fall. Or maybe more like since he had created that first horcrux.

Healing the small cut he had made on one of Igor’s hands – the man had pleaded with a broken voice to be spared – they walked along the bank of the dark lake to the place the little magical boat was hidden.

Red eyes stared out over the water infested with sleeping Inferi, intent on the small island and the green glow. He should have placed some sort of indicator so he would have known if someone had been here. He huffed in frustration, waving his hand over the boat as it rose from the waters. He had brought someone with more magic than he had planned when he had set everything up, so he needed to adjust.

Marvolo did not pay much attention to the prisoner he had dragged along, nor to the smell of wet sand, rotting fish and seaweed, all his senses were focused on trying to feel if someone had been here. Had Dumbledore managed to come here? Get the locket and leave? He had thought that no one could leave who drank the potion of despair. But as he had learned over the last weeks, it was entirely possible that he had erred. He was loath to admit it, but it was an unfortunate truth.

With a slight bump they reached the island, Marvolo gripped Igor by his arm and pulled the man up to the basin.

“You will now feel all that will let you despair. Drink!” Marvolo lowered the goblet provided into the potion and made Igor drink it. Soon the man was sobbing, begging not to continue, to be allowed to stop. But Marvolo ignored him, his eyes glued to the basin and the slowly falling level of potion.

Finally the potion was gone, and Marvolo cast a body-bind on Igor – no need to let him crawl to the lake, drink the water, and be dragged under by the Inferi – his eyes never leaving the locket at the bottom of the basin.

Something was off. Slowly the Dark-Lord-returned-to-sanity reached for the chain and lifted the locket out of the stone basin. That was not the one he had placed here the last time he had visited. His hand started to tremble. Someone had swapped them. Someone had been here.

Not setting some sort of alert had been monumentally idiotic. Maybe he should start writing down all that he had learned about the negative effects he had experienced after splitting his soul. The information available was severely lacking, after all. Not anything able to caution a young eager mind.

With trembling fingers, Marvolo opened the locket and picked the small folded parchment out of it. The locket fell to the ground as the small parchment was opened by the slim, well-manicured fingers.

The fine tremble spread through his whole body as Marvolo read the words written by Regulus Black, so many years ago.

-To the Dark Lord,

I know I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match you will be mortal once more.

R.A.B.
He was frozen in place. Frozen with fear. He felt strangely detached from his feelings, not something he had felt in recent time. His analytical mind told him that he was in shock and started to process what little information he had.

Some time before he himself had met his downfall in Henry, he had borrowed a house-elf from Regulus. Borrowed it to test the potion he had brewed. And he had vacated the place, leaving the elf behind to find his death. And he did not know if the being had died. Still shaking, Marvolo sat down beside the basin, folding the parchment. The elf had been left behind here, dying, but maybe it had been ordered to return? With more than a little annoyance, Marvolo acknowledged that he always had dismissed the power of elves. He had warded this place against wizards and witches in all the ways he knew of, but he never had bothered to ward against anything else.

So the elf returned, told everything to his owner and brought him here? It was the most likely explanation. And Regulus never planned to return, expected to die, judging by the words of the letter. Another Horcrux was in danger, a third one. Marvolo did not feel particularly good. It had been a long time since he had felt fear, but now he feared again.

Pushing the fear aside and strengthening his Occlumency shields – no need to let Henry feel the same way he was feeling at the moment – Marvolo closed his eyes and took a few breaths to calm down. The locket was missing, and he did not feel it near, so that had to imply that the wizard had drunk the potion and the elf had returned to its home with the locket?

Falling back into comfortable patterns, Marvolo pushed the fear down with anger. The locket was pushed into one of the robe pockets, the petrified wizard grabbed by his arm, flung into the air and levitated. The dark wizard that had created the army of Inferi sleeping under the water of this lake strode to his little boat and returned as fast as he was capable of to the entrance to the cave, apparating back to the old Black property once given to Dorea Black as a wedding present. He was seething with rage. If he had been able to think clearly in this moment, he would have pitied whoever would meet him first.

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Thorfinn held a long list of young wizards and witches living in less than ideal conditions to his chest. He had come here to headquarters to give his report, as requested, only to find the house empty. So he had found the room they had named the waiting room and sat down in one of the chairs, waiting.

He had been there an hour when he felt his Lord enter the wards of the house. He was angry, very angry. And trembling in his fear of being the target of that rage, Thorfinn stood from his chair to sink to the ground in a prostrating pose, knees bent, eyes to the ground, his forehead touching the carpet.

The Dark Lord did not acknowledge him, and that was all well by Thorfinn’s point of view. Because the man was so mad about something that the magic almost visibly crackled around him. A stiff-as-a-board Karkaroff was floating behind his Lord, falling with a muffled thud to the ground as the levitation spell was cancelled.
Grey eyes grew ever wider and wider as Thorfinn could no longer keep from peeking and got to watch an irate Dark Lord conjuring pottery, furniture, and glasses just to blast them to smithereens that exploded in all directions.

Thorfinn cowered as close to the ground as he could manage, praying to every god that was listening to grant him mercy. After what felt like an eternity, all the splinters were vanished and the Dark Lord spoke, “Elf! Take the traitor to his cell, make sure he survives.” A small elf popped into the room and took the wizard in tattered robes away with a pop. “Thorfinn, get yourself cleaned up and come to my study.”

With his robes flaring out behind him, the Dark Lord left the room and his trembling Death Eater behind.

It took him a few moments before he could cast the required spells on himself. One to clean himself after he had lost control in his fear, and one to get rid of the cold sweat he was drenched in. A few more flicks of his wand and murmured incantations later, his robes were clean again – all dust and wood splinters gone – and his short-cropped hair straightened out.

The blond wizard was a little bemused over his Lord’s behaviour. But as it was not his place to question his liege, he just walked over to the door to the Dark Lord’s study and knocked. After the calm-sounding order to enter, he opened the door, stepped in, and bowed low. He only could hope that he would return home unscathed today.

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Once Thorfinn had left, Marvolo thought about his possible courses of action. He did not know if the locket Horcrux had been destroyed, but he doubted that it was. Extrapolating from his change in state of mind now and before the ring had been destroyed, his emotional responses should be more pronounced if the locket shard of his soul had returned to him.

He had to assume that his Horcrux was lying about somewhere around the Black estates. Like the cup he had entrusted to Bellatrix. Luckily it was not easy to destroy one of his soul containers. Maybe he could offer something to Black – Sirius, that was – in exchange for something he had cursed under the pretext that he was planning to remove the curse? That could work. Maybe.

Severus had told him that Black was not happy with Dumbledore, and considering that the old Headmaster tended to keep his cards close to the chest, it was unlikely that Black knew about the Horcruxes and their significance.

Getting his favourite quill and a piece of simple parchment, Marvolo started a draft for a polite letter to Lord Sirius Black. He could offer to retrieve – or try to – the body of Regulus Black so that the younger brother of Black could be properly buried, in exchange for a dangerous object he wanted to neutralize.

It was a delicate dance and a risky move. But trying to steal it, or sending Henry to do it, was a much bigger risk. No, establishing a working relationship between himself and his son’s godfather was the better plan. This might prove to be an opportunity, he only needed to find the right approach to use it.
Cornelius sat in his chair behind the desk in the Minister’s office, contemplating a problem he had hoped would solve itself with enough time. It had not.

He sighed. It was rather unfortunate that no teacher had managed to keep the position as Professor for Defence Against the Dark Arts longer than a year. He had watched as Albus had struggled to find a new teacher each year. And now it seemed that Albus would not find a teacher in time. It was the middle of August, and the position was still open. Due to a law Lucius had pushed for a few years back, the Ministry was authorized and obligated to appoint a teacher when the current Headmaster was unable to find someone for a position a month before the start of a new school year.

He now had pondered the problem more than a week. They could not spare one of the aurors, even if they were the most logical and best suited candidates. And it had to be someone he could rely on to act in accordance with Ministry guidelines.

The short wizard got out of his chair and started to pace over the expensive carpet that had been a present from a Persian diplomat visiting a few years back. Marvolo was concerned over the fact that his adopted son would return to Hogwarts and under the influence of Albus Dumbledore. And Cornelius would be too, if he was in his shoes. After all, Marvolo had once been… You-Know-Who, and Albus had always fought against him with all he had at his disposal.

Furthermore, the past weeks had proven that Albus did not believe the story about the ancient curse influencing Marvolo to commit all those horrible acts. Cornelius himself was not too sure that the story was true. But he recognized the desire to act on the political stage in the so much younger seeming wizard by the name of Tom Marvolo Riddle, or more accurately, Lord Marvolo Slytherin.

If he managed to keep him on the political stage, it might be possible to keep him from becoming Lord… You-Know-Who, again. Cornelius scoffed, it was a little pathetic that he could not even think his name. Maybe Dolores would be a good candidate for the job? She was driving him ragged with her agenda regarding werewolves, and getting her away from politics for a while might help sort that tangled mess out.

He knew that Dolores had her own agenda, but she always held with his directives, so he might be able to keep an eye on the happenings at the school. Giving information to Lord Slytherin, keeping on his good side, keeping him on the good side.

He sat down behind his desk, dragging a parchment for one of the flying memos to himself and started writing to her, asking for her to come by this afternoon. He would appoint her to the position of DADA professor, accomplishing several things at once. He would be getting her away from the Wizengamot for the next year, getting a set of eyes at Hogwarts, and maybe gaining a favour from Lord Slytherin.

Once the little paper plane had left his office, Cornelius felt better. Maybe, just maybe, he could end his career without a new war starting and being remembered as the Minister that brought peace back to Wizarding Britain after the war against.. You-Know-Who. After the trouble of the Tournament, he had feared the worst, trying to ignore the signs. A fool’s way to deal with a problem, but the only way he had to deal with his fears at the time. The situation now was much more to his liking. A sane Lord was someone he could handle, a situation he knew, so much better than an insane Dark Lord.
Smiling, Cornelius Fudge waited for Dolores Umbridge to come to his office. And maybe Amelia had news for him regarding that nasty business with the Dementors later, if they could find the culprit, they might be able to keep their guards at the prison.

Problems tended to act like the heads of the Hydra. If you severed one from the body, two new ones grew almost in the same moment. There was no way to deal with this other than to tackle one problem at a time. So first: getting Dolores Umbridge out of his way.

On Sunday the 20th of August, Sirius stood at the floo after he had sent his godson back to Griffin House and the man that had custody of Harry. The afternoon in the small garden on the roof of the Black house at Grimmauld Place had been wonderful. They had talked at length over pranks Sirius and his friends had played during their time at Hogwarts.

Harry seemed so happy and carefree, had even brought his sketchpad and showed him some rough sketches of him in his animagus form. It grated to admit it, but it seemed that Lord Slytherin was doing a good job of being a guardian. Sirius had trouble putting ‘father’ and that bastard into the same sentence, even in his own head.

A letter he had received a few days ago had brought only more confusion. It mentioned an old protection that he had placed during the time he had been Lord… You-Know-Who, and the concern that there were more objects out there that could reach hands that did not know what they were doing.

It seemed that one such object had not been where it had been placed, but there had been evidence that Regulus had moved it. Lord Slytherin claimed that he had not known what had happened to the younger Black, and always assumed that he either was killed by an auror or Order member, or some nasty creature, but now suspected that he had run into some protections. He offered to try and find the remains of Regulus Arcturus Black in exchange for the possibility of searching for the object that had been protected and was a danger to everyone that might come into contact with it.

Sirius really was conflicted over this. He had not told Harry any of this, and did not plan to do so any time soon. But the prospect that he might get to bury his brother, that his little brother had defied the bastard of a dark wizard, that he had tried to return to the light, filled him with some fuzzy warm feelings.

He had to speak with Moony. It could, after all, be an intricate trap. He needed a second opinion. Sirius changed direction to walk up to Moony’s room, might as well speak with him now.

Chapter End Notes

I always thought that Cornelius Fudge needed to be at least a little bit intelligent to get to the place of Minister. But he always seemed to me to only see what he wanted to see and ignore everything else. So my version of Fudge should be a little more intelligent and perceptive than canon Fudge!
Thank bunches to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling! You spot the little stupid errors that repeatedly slip my notice.

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As he stepped out of the fireplace and into the living room of the Burrow, Molly was fussing over some tea and some small sandwiches. Bill was sitting at the low table, laying out some runestones in preparation for the work they had planned for this morning.

“Good day, everyone!” Albus greeted cheerfully, casting a quick wordless cleaning charm to get rid of the soot and ash covering his robes. Arthur was not there, he was at work, Molly looked not really happy with Albus or the situation, and Bill was looking deep in concentration. The other children were probably with friends or somewhere outside. Not really concerned about the size of the audience, Albus walked over to sit beside the curse-breaker, who was going to have a look at the curse bound to his hand and decide if it was liftable or not.

“Your sandwiches look delicious as always, Molly.”

She snorted and nodded to her son, she looked as if she were chewing on a lemon, unsure of herself and her decisions, “Bill, I will be in the garden helping your siblings degnome it.” And with that Molly was gone.

Albus was unsure what he had done to make her act this way, or if anything he had done truly was the reason for her behaviour. But now was not the time to ponder this, he was here to find out if he should accept the offer from Tom to lift the curse.

“Come here, Headmaster,” Bill said, waving for Albus to give him the cursed hand. “I will cast the best detection spells I know. We will discover what this curse is.”

Without another word, Albus shrugged out of his bright yellow robes, sitting on the old sagging sofa only in his tunic and trousers, pushing the tunic sleeve up to his elbow.

Waving his wand over the shrivelled, blackened hand and murmuring under his breath, Bill started his work. The chants and spells got longer and more complicated as he resorted to more languages than Latin, such as the older versions of English or French. Different coloured auras flared around the hand and lower arm, not something Albus could have interpreted, but Bill seemed to learn something from it.

The red-haired wizard laid out a pattern with the runestones, placing the headmaster’s hand in the middle of it. A parchment and a quill were prepared and the chanting started anew.

During Bill’s chanting, rearranging the pattern of runestones, and the quill recording, Albus contemplated what he would do if the curse proved to be liftable. Because he had already decided what he would do if it was un liftable.

He knew that if he did nothing, he would not live to see another summer. But he also knew that Tom was not offering to lift the curse out of the goodness of his heart. Albus had known from the moment he had met the child back then, that he was rotten to the core. He had hoped, of course, that he might be able to help the child back onto the right path, but as with his good friend back when he was still dreaming, all hope had been futile.

Once he had not recognized a dark wizard for what he was, but he had promised himself never to repeat that error. That the little orphan boy was stealing at his age and able to speak to snakes, and
with all the stories the matron had told him… it had been foolish even to dare to hope. Or maybe not truly foolish. Sirius and Severus were excellent examples of wizards destined to be dark who had turned from that side and had seen the light. No, there was always the possibility of love and friendship turning a dark wizard back to the light.

Most likely the move Tom was making with this unexpected offer was a political one. If his former student wanted to confine himself to political manoeuvring, Albus was not someone to stand in his way. Cutting down on the violence was not the thing Albus had wanted to work towards. It would be that much harder to convince the other magical people in Britain that Tom Riddle, now called Lord Slytherin, was a danger, if he was keeping to the political arena. But now that it seemed it was going to be a mostly political struggle, he would find a way to work with it.

It would take some time to find out what the other horcruxes were, and where they were hidden. Only two had been identified so far. Albus still remembered vividly the day Harry had brought him the diary, pierced by a basilisk fang, and the epiphany it had been. But besides confirming his suspicions of just how Tom had managed not to die that night, it also provided more evidence that Harry was another of the anchors tying Tom Riddle to this world.

Considering that at some point Harry had to die, and he did not know anyone who could take over the important task of finding and destroying all of Voldemort’s horcruxes, Albus had to stay alive to do all of that himself.

Now he only had to hope that this curse was actually one that could be removed.

“Well, that's interesting,” Bill said, sheathing his wand and looking up from the parchment and the data recorded on it. “It seems the curse is Egyptian in origin. An anti-theft spell woven together with one often used to guard tombs. It will reduce intruders to mummies in a matter of minutes.”

The young man sounded eager and excited. It was obvious that he loved his work and the new things he got to see on a regular basis. “I haven’t seen such a combination before. The way these two were woven together with a kind of switch, so that it can be lifted again, but only by the original caster… that is the work of a master of his art.” Bill focused his attention on the old Headmaster of Hogwarts. “If you can find the person who did cast this curse in the first place, and he or she is willing to lift it, you should be fine.” Admiring blue eyes looked at the unsightly hand. “The restraining curses and charms placed on your hand – while excellent work – will only hold so long.”

Albus could see that the young wizard was almost bursting at the seams with questions, and quite eager to ask them all, pestering Albus until he would answer. Forestalling the barrage of questions, Albus stood with a kind smile for the oldest son of the Weasley family. “Thank you very much for your help, William, my boy. I will show myself out. Relay my best wishes to Molly.” With a last nod, Albus walked out of the living room, through the kitchen, and into the garden. With a cheery wave at the Weasleys working in the overgrown garden, Albus left the wards and apparated back to Hogwarts.

He had a letter to write and a meeting to arrange. The prospect of meeting Tom again and allowing the man to point a wand at him, made Albus feel a little uneasy.
was waiting for Lord Black to join him, inspecting the odd paintings the walls next to the table he had chosen were lined with. In fact he had not thought that much would come of his tentative offer to meet and speak about the trade he had in mind. But now here he was, sipping his sweet tea and waiting for the other to arrive.

The young girl with bright blue hair working here had just brought him his second cup of tea, as Sirius Black made his way into the room – Marvolo had opted for avoiding the heat in the open – searching with wandering eyes and finding the one he had come to meet, with his wandering eyes.

“Nice you could make it,” Marvolo greeted the other, aware of the Muggles surrounding them and listening in on their conversation. They would have to wait a bit before they could come to the topic for which they were meeting.

Black nodded, “This is something I’m really curious about, so I just couldn't not come.” The other Lord of the Wizengamot took a seat and picked up the menu to see what he would order.

They sat in silence till the young waitress came back, taking their order – black coffee for Black and a big slice of chocolate cake with whipped cream for Marvolo – only to fall back into silence the moment she left.

They stayed in this uncomfortable and strained silence until Marvolo could cast a privacy spell Severus had invented, after their order had been brought to their table.

Spooning three small heaps of sugar into his cup, Marvolo finally broke the silence. “After I became aware that someone broke some old enchantments of mine and got cursed in the process, I realized that there are more dangerous things still laying around that I probably should take care of.”

Black could not refrain from snorting at this, blowing at his coffee to cool it down a little. Marvolo rolled his eyes, but let it slide. After all, Black was right. He should have thought about this earlier, for several reasons Black was not aware of.

“As you probably know, I still remember what I did while in the grip of the ancient curse.” A flicker of resentment in Black’s eyes told Marvolo that the other did not truly believe the official story, but had no evidence to disprove the claim. “I checked on one place I used to ward a dangerous object and did not find the object, but instead found a letter from your brother.” The older Black brother tensed in his seat, his knuckles turning white with tension as he gripped his cup harder. “He said he intended to move it and did not expect to live. I have not dismantled the protections yet, but plan to do so soon. I might be able to recover the remains of your brother, Lord Black, but I will not take the risk needlessly.” A spark of resentment flickered to life in grey eyes but was quickly squashed. Marvolo knew he was goading the other man, but he enjoyed it too much to simply stop.

“You Slytherins never do anything without looking out for yourselves first,” Black spat in distaste, but with much less venom than Marvolo had expected. It seemed that Black truly wished for the opportunity to reclaim his brother's body. “What do you want? Your letter was not really forthcoming about that.”

“I had borrowed the help of a Black house-elf to finalize the security around the object. I think that this is the answer to the question of how Regulus came to know about the place. I need to recover the object your brother moved. No one but me can disable the dangerous spells layered into and around the object. Most likely it is somewhere in one of the Black properties, or it would have caused havoc long ago.” Marvolo took a bite out of his cake, smiling at the rich chocolate taste. He loved a well-made sweet. “I want your permission to speak with the elf, if it is still alive, and
search the Black properties for the object your brother moved from its protected location.” The dark look in the stormy grey eyes did suggest that Black was not happy with what he wanted out of this deal. “In exchange I will do my best to retrieve the body of your brother to return him to you.”

Black snorted. “That hardly is a sound deal. Retrieving a body and not promising to even return him, only to try! That is a joke!”

Tiredly rubbing his temples, Marvolo quickly thought about what to tell. It was rather risky to try to retrieve a body from among the Inferi. Well, maybe the truth was the best option in this situation. “I will have to risk much if I try.” He sighed. Life could be so simple, had been so simple. “I used a rather sizeable number of Inferi to guard the place, Black. So as easy as it may sound, it is anything but.”

Pausing with his cup raised halfway up to drink from it, Black stared at the wizard sitting opposite from him. He blinked a few times really slowly and Marvolo started to worry that he might have broken the other man.


Tapping on the table with the fingers of his left hand, Black watched Marvolo with thoughts swirling behind his eyes. Marvolo concentrated on his cake. It often was tempting to take a dip into the mind of someone to get answers a little faster, but it always was risky to give in to the temptation.

Slowly speaking, Black laid out the plan he had cooked up in the last few silent minutes. “Is it possible that some others among those… protections could be people missing still? Wizards and witches missed by their families, who do not know what has become of their loved ones? I will not allow you to search my properties for only the chance to get the body of my brother back!”

Now it was Marvolo’s turn to think. Was he willing to search for other wizards and witches among the Inferi? He was not even sure that he had used the bodies of magical folk to create the Inferi in the cave. And he certainly did not remember every insignificant person who died in the war. He would need names and pictures to have even a snowflake’s chance in hell to recognize anyone. He had just not cared, so now he did not remember. Maybe he could use that to build up the credibility of his story.

So, young wizard recovering from an ancient curse of paranoia... he could pretend that to get one horcrux back under his control. He spoke, hesitant, eyes downcast, hands clasped as if to stop them from shaking. “You must know that not everyone that died, died in… my presence, or by my hand.” He took a deep breath as if to calm down, fighting painful memories. “If you can get pictures and names of those still considered missing, I can search my memories of the war and convey what I can remember?” The offer came out as a question on purpose, and he had to hide a smile at the confused look on Black’s face. It seemed that he could have made a decent living as an actor.

Black nodded. “I’ll see if I can get you that list of names and pictures. Maybe a time frame when they vanished would help as well?” There was a hint of sarcasm in the last Black’s voice. Or were there some relatives somewhere that could carry the name on? Marvolo only knew of the three Black sisters, all married. If Sirius Black had no children, another family would vanish in the male line. A pity.

Marvolo forced a contemplative look on his face, nodding slowly. It was a good idea. And this all could work in his favour to establish him as some young wizard working to right past wrongs,
separating him farther from Voldemort. “Dates when someone was last seen and where can help.”

And now on to the other topic he had planned to speak about, not that he had told the other so in the letter he had sent. “Before we part, there is another topic I want to talk about with you.” He had no need to pretend to be nervous now. And he still was infuriated that he felt uncomfortable with this topic. “Seeing what information has been withheld from Henry, I do not dare to rely on his previous guardians to have explained certain things to him.”

Marvolo could clearly see that Black was not following. He sighed. He probably had to be more blunt, he was speaking with a Gryffindor, after all. “Your godson has turned fifteen this summer. I would expect that he will be entangled in the more complicated social interactions between teenagers sometime during the school year.” Black still had a small frown of confusion on his face. “I’m certain I can explain the customs of courtship and blunders to avoid to him, but I suspect that there are more personal questions Henry might want to ask that he would be more comfortable discussing with you.”

With a sudden burst of laughter Black bend forward in his chair. After several moments the man managed to rein in his laughter, still gasping for breath, wiping his eyes clear of the tears his boisterous laughter had caused. “Yeah, send him to me for explanations. I doubt that you, Lord Slytherin, have much experience with the ladies. In fact, I think you can forego the whole thing. Just send Harry to me and I will tell him everything he needs to know.”

His pride bruised, but hiding it well – or though he thought – Marvolo shook his head in polite decline. “I will be held accountable for his actions. I will make sure he knows what is expected of an heir in this regard. But I know that for some of it, my son –” Oh how much he liked the flinch that got out of Black, “– will be more comfortable speaking with his godfather. So you do agree?”

“I do.”

They each paid their bill and left soon after that. Marvolo actually was quite happy with the outcome of the afternoon. There was a certain risk that Dumbledore would learn of his searching for a dangerous object hidden somewhere in one of the Black houses. But not searching made it much more probable that someone would stumble over the locket... and that someone could well be the Headmaster.

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This afternoon Marvolo had been in Muggle London meeting with Sirius. Harry was now sitting at the table across from his guardian, wondering how the talk had gone. He knew that one of the horcruxes had been removed from its hiding place, and Marvolo thought Sirius’ younger brother had moved it. It was refreshing that an adult actually told Harry things that were going on. Of course he could not have missed the pain as Marvolo had been forced to reabsorb another horcrux, but being informed about the fact that another one had not been where it had been hidden, and that it was possible that it was hidden somewhere his godfather had access to, Harry felt good being in the know, so to speak. So he had been told that the meeting between Marvolo and Sirius was to talk about the locket and the possibility of searching for it in the Black properties.

“How did the meeting go?” Harry finally caved and asked what he wanted to know.

“I think it is reasonable to say it went pretty well,” Marvolo answered, nodding with a small grim
smile. “Your godfather insisted that I would have to give him more than the possibility of maybe
getting the body of his brother to bury, so he will assemble a list of names of missing wizards and
witches he requires me to provide information about.”

“Information?” What information could Marvolo have about some random missing people? But
even before the man picking at his fish stew could answer, Harry’s eyes became wide with the
realization that Voldemort would have had a hand in their disappearance in the first place. “Oh.”

Marvolo only nodded and changed the topic of conversation by asking Harry about this day’s
lessons. The tutoring in ancient runes had been stepped up a bit in preparation for the exam he was
to take in two days’ time. Glad for this much less dangerous topic, Harry started to recount the
things he had done that day and what he had planned for the next.

Over dessert – a concoction of different summer berries, meringue, whipped cream, and vanilla ice
cream – Harry finally gathered the courage to ask what had been on his mind since that first
dancing lesson at Malfoy Manor. “I’ve wanted to ask for a while now, if… if you are
contemplating arranging a betrothal for me, sir.” Green eyes were now locked on the dish of cut
crystal filled with the dessert, nervously waiting for an answer. He had not anticipated hearing a
small sigh from across the table.

“I have indeed thought about this problem. But I do not intend to make arrangements at the present
moment.” Harry huffed a small sigh of relief. “But I have something related to this that we need to
speak about.”

Nervously Harry raised his eyes again and almost did a double take at the nervousness the other
was projecting into the room.

“Obviously you are aware of the custom of arranging marriages between those from old families
with seats on the Wizengamot. There is more to it than a plan to marry later in life – mostly after
the parties involved have finished their schooling – and you need to know about that as well.”

A little apprehensive – was this going to be a talk about bees and flowers? – Harry nodded and
slowly continued to eat his dessert.

“You probably will get interested in some of your schoolmates in the next years. That is only
natural, and I do not truly wish to get involved in your discovering this part of being an adult. But
there are certain rules that need to be observed if you do not wish to bring disgrace to both the
Slytherin and Potter families.” A pointed look was directed at Harry and the teenager had trouble
preventing a blush.

It was to be a talk about ‘bees and flowers’. How mortifying. And he thought that he already knew
the basics. He lived in a dorm most of the year, together with several other boys. And the fact that
he interacted with the twins and the others of the Quidditch team provided him with more
information than he really wanted on some points. But maybe this was more about social customs –
rules, he had said – and not the mechanics of kissing… and other things. So he kept quiet and tried
not to blush too much.

“It is equally okay to be with boys as it is to be with girls, but I would ask that you do not engage in
anything with someone more than one year younger than you are.” Curiously, the obvious
discomfort of Marvolo did nothing to reduce the same feeling in Harry. Why was it necessary to
speak of such things?

“But you need to make sure that the one you go on dates with, hold hands, kiss… or more –” now
both wizards were fixing their stares on their dessert dishes, “– is not betrothed to anyone. It would
be a severe insult to just disregard such an arrangement.”

Hurriedly Harry nodded to communicate his understanding as soon as he realized an acknowledgement was needed from him.

“Besides that, you should always be careful to prevent a pregnancy. It would cause a great scandal and would probably ruin the girl’s reputation and future.” By now Harry felt as if his head was about to catch fire any moment.

They both were now finished with dessert and Marvolo stood, waving Harry to follow him over to the study with the painting of his grandparents. “Can we go up to my room instead?” Harry asked, embarrassed but determined not to have this conversation in front of the parents of his father James.

“If you prefer. I see no reason not to.” Marvolo accepted Harry’s wish and started to ascend the stairs up to Harry’s bedroom.

Once they had reached the room they settled down, Harry on his bed and Marvolo in the chair from the desk which he had turned so he was sitting facing the teenager. “I have no problems with you… getting involved, with either a boy or a girl, nor with someone of… mixed ancestry.” Harry was fairly sure that the red-eyed wizard would be squirming in his seat with discomfort if he was not so strong-willed and determined to hold up a certain image. And he was on the verge of laughing out loud over the man who once had been Lord Voldemort, bent on killing off Muggles as well as wizards and witches born to non-magicals, telling him that it was perfectly fine to go on dates with a muggle-born witch… or wizard. Harry wondered, could he imagine holding hands with another boy, kissing another boy? He honestly was not sure. Girls were pretty confusing most of the time. It probably would be easier with a boy. Or not?

“I would mind if I were to learn that you were breaking curfew to sneak around with your crush. Or got up to any other rule-breaking.” The stern glare was somewhat diminished by his slightly red-tinted face. If Harry could ever bring himself to tell Ron and Hermione about this talk, he was sure the both of them would not believe him. Seeing how embarrassed they both were, Harry suspected that this talk would never be mentioned again once they were finished.

“Why would I be sneaking around after curfew?” Harry blurted out, his blush getting deeper.

“The other may be from another house?”

Harry had to concede that that might be a reason to be out after hours.

Two books zooming in through the door were caught deftly by Marvolo, who most likely had summoned them without a wand or an incantation. “This is a book about the intricacies of courtships... Common pitfalls for a young wizard or witch... What is expected of both in interactions with another. And other things of interest in regards to this.” Marvolo held out a hefty tome bound in dark brown leather and with a nice patterning around the cut edges. Harry took it, placing it next to him on the bed. “This book,” Marvolo held a much smaller book with the title ‘Useful Charms for the Young Bachelor’ up between them, “Contains spells I think you should know. Besides one to shave, some for mending clothes, and the contraceptive charm, there are others that you might find interesting.” Harry took this second book full of apprehension. A book that had a wizard known for practising the dark arts blushing made him anxious.

“I talked to your godfather, and he agreed that you can talk to him about anything you might want to know regarding this topic. While I understand if you are not comfortable discussing this with me, I want to assure you, Henry, that I will always take the time to listen and help you to find answers.”
Harry felt tension leave his body, it seemed The Talk was about to be over.

“But I insist on showing you the contraceptive charm now. I need to know you are proficient in casting it.”

It took Harry a record time of only fifteen minutes to pick up the charm. Humiliation and the need for solitude seemed to do wonders for his ability to pick up something new.

After Marvolo had left – relieved, Harry judged by the way he hurried through the door – Harry picked up the book of charms for bachelors. Soon Harry was blushing again. In between spells to clean up a room in record time and mend clothes in a fix, were some that certainly were not on the curriculum of the school. And the contraceptive charm was certainly the tamest of them. Reading them, and the situations they were to be applied in, Harry came to the conclusion that he barely knew the fundamentals of kissing and… other things. He briefly wondered if there were more books out there to get a better overview. He started to laugh quietly, imagining Hermione’s face if he was to ask her for help finding those books. No, he probably would try the twins first. Or maybe Sirius. He suspected that talking to him would be embarrassing as well, but he should have some first-hand experience. Hopefully.

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Marvolo was glad that this particular task was now behind him. With some luck, all further questions would be asked of Black and he only had to concern himself with this in regards to the social demands that a young Lord should be married.

He tiredly rubbed his eyes once he sat in his chair behind the desk. The last parties he had attended he had been stalked by some not-yet-married witches, and some that were widows. He probably would not escape getting married for long. But he was not sure how to pick someone to spend the rest of his life with. Or at least live with for several decades – he still did not intend to die – and he was not even sure he fancied witches.

How did one know if one was attracted to the male or female sex? He sighed, pushing these thoughts away and starting on the paperwork. He wanted to start with planning the wards for Xerxes’ school, but he would work on the more boring stuff first. The warding could be a treat after he finished the rest.

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The last days of August were speeding by. Finally, in the last week before the start of term, the Hogwarts letters arrived. Harry was glad, he had gotten worried that he would not get to buy his things himself. Marvolo had set the rule down that he needed at least two days of warning before he would take his son – Harry started to lose the resentment every time the man said this – into the public.

So now here they were, in some of their best robes – Harry’s lengthened with a spell as all of his clothes were getting short – waiting for the rest to arrive. Messrs Goyle and Crabbe were to accompany them as guards. They would floo to the Leaky Cauldron and meet up with the rest
there. Harry had exchanged owls with Hermione and Neville, arranging to meet and get around
together. All the adults anticipated an overflowing Alley, as all families with Hogwarts’ students
had to buy their things in the very last days. And as many parents were working on weekdays,
Saturday the 26th was bound to be the day most would choose to go to London.

Harry was sure he would meet many from the school he had met at the different parties he had had
to attend. Once word made the rounds that he had been to Neville’s party and had given a birthday
party himself, he had been invited to many more small and large gatherings of Hogwarts students
close to his age. He quickly learned that they all were somehow connected to the Ministry, and
those that also invited Marvolo were somehow bound or connected to the more traditional, or as
they were called by those designating themselves as light, dark families. Harry was not sure if he
understood that divide any longer, it seemed pretty pointless. He had met people he liked in both
groups, as well as those he could not stand. The truly dark arts were horrible, that much Harry
regarded as truth, but he still was amazed that Marvolo never even allowed him to get one of those
books down from the shelves.

After ten minutes of waiting the two burly wizards they had been waiting for came in and got
down on one knee, after they had thrown uncertain gazes at Harry. The green-eyed teenager simply
ignored them. He already knew they were Death Eaters – they had been at the graveyard, after all –
but as always he was resolved to ignore their behaviour towards Voldemort, because to him the
man always acted as Marvolo. And that was the important part as far as Harry was concerned.

“Do you have your portkey, Henry?” Marvolo said waving his wand over his eyes, turning them
from their startling red to a blue just as bright.

Rolling his eyes – that was the third time this question was asked – Harry answered with as much
resignation and respect he could muster. “I have, sir.” The quiet chuckling, quickly turned into a
cough, from one of the guards waiting near the door, indicated that he had not been quite
successful.

“They let’s go!” Marvolo led the small group into the floo room and Goyle, or Crabbe – Harry had
not managed to identify who was who once – went through the floo first, followed by Marvolo and
then Harry. The other guard brought up the rear.

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Petting the smooth surface of her new silken gown, Hermione wondered at the drastic changes that
had taken place in her life in the past few weeks. Since she had accepted the position as the heiress
to House Lestrange, new responsibilities and lessons had crowded her schedule. Her parents had
been eager to help her Uncle Xerxes plan the curriculum of the school he was founding in
remembrance of his sister. Hermione had eagerly followed the process and even visited the places
being evaluated for their usefulness as a school building. They were down to two places, both big
manors surrounded by smaller buildings, and Xerxes planned to make a decision before September
the first.

Slipping on the gown over her undies, Hermione gathered her hair together into a style better suited
to the heat, and slipped on her shoes and a light summer robe. She needed to hurry so she would
not be late to meet Harry.

Bounding down the stairs she came upon her parents talking amiably with Lord Xerxes Lestrange.
The old wizard spotted the young woman on the stairs and smiled at her. “Hermione, I’m happy to see you, are you ready to brave the masses in Diagon Alley?”

Smiling to the twinkling in his eyes, Hermione nodded. “I am, uncle.” She gave brief hugs to her parents and went outside to the garden with her uncle. They would apparate to their destination.

“Ready?” She nodded in answer and braced for the odd and uncomfortable sensation of side-along apparation.

Only seconds later she was catching her breath, clinging to the arm of Xerxes so she would not topple to the ground and embarrass herself and her family. How quickly she had picked up this stupid thought pattern, Hermione thought irritably. But what others thought of you still had much weight in the wizarding part of Britain. Scanning their surroundings, Hermione conceded that celebrities in the Muggle world were held to impossible standards of conduct as well. So maybe it was not so old-fashioned and backwards as she would like to believe.

The moment the two of them stepped into the tavern, Hermione spotted Harry standing beside the three imposing wizards. Finding her path through the crowded place, the curly-haired witch managed to stop herself from embracing Harry the moment she came near enough, nodding at him in greeting instead, before turning to Lord Slytherin. “Nice to meet you, Lord Slytherin. I hope you have a good day.”

The man that had adopted her friend without asking first smiled charmingly. “Nice to meet you too, heiress Lestrange. I’m thankful you have agreed to keep my son company on this shopping outing.”

Fighting off a shiver – knowing who the man was or had been still creeped her out – Hermione nodded back politely. “It is my pleasure,” before she turned to Harry who grinned at her with sparkling eyes.

“Marvolo,” Lord Lestrange greeted his old school friend who now looked so much younger, and was greeted with a happy “Xerxes” in return.

“Shall we start with getting new school robes?” Lord Slytherin proposed and gave Hermione a small smirk as he added, “I think we should keep the book stores for last, or we will not finish everything we have to do today.” They shared a laugh about this joke at Hermione’s expense and started to walk out into the backyard and through the portal opened by Mr. Goyle, who acted as guard. Hermione was unhappy that such measures where necessary, but because they were she did not say anything, falling in step beside Harry, eager to relate her newest news to him.

“I was made prefect.” She was almost bouncing beside her friend. “Are you the male prefect?” she had to ask, even if she had started to doubt that Professor McGonagall would even suggest him or that the Headmaster would approve it.

Harry’s slight shake of his head confirmed her thoughts. “Have you any idea who it might be?” Dean and Seamus, Ron or Neville... she had trouble deciding who of those boys in her year was suited for the job.

“I have no idea. What are the requirements for the job?” Harry said and ignored all the stares and occasional jibes directed at him. Hermione admired his ability to let all this not affect him, or at least appear as if it did not affect him.

Soon they stepped into the shop of Madame Malkin – walking by some glowering and some cheering patrons of the Alley – ordering new Hogwarts robes and a new set of clothes for Harry as
well.

Spending time with her friend, even if they were followed everywhere by guards, was wonderful, and Hermione tried to keep to the positive parts for the afternoon. She stepped up on one of the small stages to get her measurements taken.

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Draco Malfoy was stepping into the robe shop of Madam Malkin as a party of several people were leaving. It took him a moment to recognize just who those people were. He managed to curb his urge to bow to the Dark Lord just in time and managed a nod instead. In passing he greeted the others. Lord Lestrange and his heiress – his teeth hurt to think that the girl he had ridiculed and insulted constantly now was the heiress of one of the old families – the fathers of Vincent and Gregory, and Henry. After several lessons by his mother, the other boy had finally conceded to allow Draco to call him by his given name, as it became cumbersome to keep to the more formal address.

They were not carrying any bags or boxes, probably sent them home with a house-elf, and were soon lost to Draco in the sea of people. It was exceptionally busy in the alley today. “Why did we not come earlier for those things we knew I would be needing?” The blond teenager asked of his mother, who was following him.

“Because I wanted to keep it all as short as possible. So finishing all in one day seemed like a good idea,” the Lady just shrugged, herding her son inside and out of the way of those wanting to enter or exit the shop. Resigned, Draco did as he was told, submitting to the fussing of the shop assistant. He had had a growth spurt over the summer and was in desperate need of new school clothes.

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Strolling through the overly crowded apothecary, Severus looked at the newly arrived exotic ingredients and the neatly stacked first-year kits near one of the windows to Diagon Alley. It had not escaped his notice that he now was here the third time since he had first met the daughter of the owner. An evening spent pacing in front of his floo, taking sips from an excellent red wine – a present for one of his birthdays from Lucius – had been enough for him to examine his feelings over the whole meeting. He had come to the conclusion that he liked the young Squib, even found her attractive. Trying to distract himself with work only had culminated in a rather swiftly executed experiment of the two-fathers-potion. Now they were awaiting the result. It was a sad fact that it took at least a few days before a charm could detect a pregnancy. But they did not want to risk the magic of the charm affecting the result in any way and were waiting for nature to run its course.

And that he had only gotten the ingredients he needed immediately, creating an excuse to come back soon.

The order he had received to find a partner, marry, and start a family, was not something he could forget. He felt a little guilt for looking at Sonja Jiggers with the thoughts of fulfilling his orders. And he was not even sure she was the one he could live with for the rest of his life.
They certainly had enough common interests, as proven in many heated and animated debates about the quality of plants grown on the British Isles. And with the way they tended to banter – maybe it could even be called flirting? – the attraction seemed to be mutual.

Avoiding another gaggle of little students, Severus spotted the Dark Lord and his heir walking down the street outside of the apothecary. There were others following them, but Severus was not paying attention. His eyes were trained on the beautiful woman standing behind the counter, filling small jars and bottles with ingredients for the customers. She noticed that she was being watched and smiled in his direction as she spotted him. An almost invisible smile curled Severus’ lips as he nodded in acknowledgement.

She was a Squib, and Severus did not mind a bit, but he wondered if the Dark Lord would have reservations about a match with a person unable to wield magic. There probably was no other way than to ask, and better to do it soon before he got involved further. He did not know if he would be able to let go and follow his orders, if he got too attached.

He got what he needed, walked over to the counter to pay and left with a small smile on his face, refraining from waving to Sonja, he had an image to hold up.

ooooo

They finally reached the book store. Hermione was still thrilled to be there, storming into the depths of the shop searching for books she wanted to buy, forcing Xerxes to follow with an apologetic shrug to Marvolo.

Harry was tired by now. Walking around, avoiding collisions with other shoppers, and selecting the things he would need for the next school year, his OWL year, was more strenuous than one would think.

The green-eyed teenager got out his list of books he needed to buy, smiling smugly as he saw again the entry for the fourth-year runes text. He had managed to get a good grade in his exam, resulting in him being allowed to attend the fourth-year runes lessons, getting rid of divination in the process.

Marvolo and he went through the rows of shelves, placing book after book in a basket that was floating beside them. They had trouble getting through the shop. The last time Harry had seen the shop filled with people was the year Gilderoy Lockhart had held his book signing there. Between one moment and the next, Harry was facing two freckled faces topped by red hair.

“Look what we have here, Fred! A young heir of Slytherin!” one of the twins exclaimed, clapping Harry on the shoulder.

“Fred, George, how are you?” a happy Harry beamed at them, all his weariness forgotten.

“We're fine, Harrykins. Looking forward to our last year at Hogwarts.”

“The best opportunity for market research, right there at the customer base.” They both were looking excited and full of energy.

“Your investment has helped us a great deal. We were able to perfect some of our products. Now we need to make sure that all people react the same way to them.” Harry was surprised by the
earnestness and seriousness in the twins. But this was what they wanted to do with their lives. Maybe it was not surprising that they would let their more childish side rest about the important stuff.

“Will you show me a few of your products?” he inquired eagerly. But before the twins could answer, a mass of people were pressing in from the side, separating them. Harry tried to spot Marvolo or one of the guards, but could only spin in place, stumbling every time he was pushed by someone as they all tried to leave the shop. At first Harry wondered what was happening until he got a good whiff of the stench that drove the customers out into the open. And Harry agreed wholeheartedly, turning – gagging – to find his way out before he started to search for the adults he came here with.

He finally made it out of Flourish and Blotts. Taking a few deep breaths, he started to turn around his own axis looking to find the others.

Suddenly he was grabbed by someone and dragged into a small alleyway next to the shop on the left from the book store. “What do I have here?” a slimy voice whispered next to Harry’s ear, turning the young wizard and pressing him against the wall.

“A young lordling. Silencio. No calling for help now.” There was a nasty smile on the man’s face. Harry decided on the spot that he did not like the man one bit. His robes were dirty and torn, his teeth yellow. But most of all the disturbingly evil smile unnerved Harry. And with the spell on him he could not call for help, nor activate his portkey to just get away. But there was still the tracking spell on the pendant. He had not believed that he would be glad about it anytime soon. So now he just had to make sure to stall as long as he was able.

“Oh, what your father might pay to get you back! Just be a good boy and do as you are told, then nothing bad will happen.” With those words he tried to get Harry to walk deeper into the dank alleyway, away from the agitated crowd, away from Marvolo. He was not okay with that, so he pretended to have injured his leg, starting to limp.

“What is it, lordling? Hurt?” Harry winced and nodded, trying to be convincing. But with little success it seemed, as the man just continued on his way down the alley, dragging Harry along.

Thinking quickly, sure only desperate measures would help him now – the man’s grip around his wrist was like devil's snare – Harry let himself fall to the ground the next time he was tugged to walk faster.

His would-be kidnapper cursed, kicking Harry in his chest before trying to get him back on his feet by pulling on his arm.

Slipping through his grip, Harry rolled away from him, scrambling to get to his feet and run, his hands almost touching the ground. Before he knew it he felt his robes being grabbed and slipped out of them, leaving a swearing man behind and tumbling into the arms of an enraged wizard with blazing red eyes.

.:Where have you been?:. hissed Marvolo furiously and protectively pressing Harry against his chest.

Harry opened and closed his mouth, unable to say anything and too scatter-brained at the moment to come up with a way to explain why he was unable to answer.

The rest of the afternoon went by in a swirl of colours. He was apparated back to Griffin House and placed into his bed, with a calming draught and an admonishment to rest: he did exactly that.
And Marvolo was there with him almost all the time. After he had set his people after the one trying to abduct Harry and gave his statement to the aurors, of course.

It had been a really eventful summer. Hopefully the year at the school would be a boring one for a change.

oooOOooo

Later in the evening Marvolo was sitting in the study a tumbler with fire whiskey before him and three letters on the desk.

One was the report of the aurors, stating that one customer had dropped a phial of skunk secretion in the back of the book store, causing a panic. They had no idea where the wizard that had tried to kidnap Henry had run to. But they were searching.

The other letter contained his OWLs results. He had managed Outstandings in all the subjects he had taken them in. He was happy, but at the moment his academic achievements were not really important.

He was trying to calm down from his fear over loosing his son. He had panicked once he realized that Henry was no longer next to him, and the crowed had pressed in from all directions. Marvolo was still shocked that he had felt so strongly.

But at the moment he tried to decide what to think about the last letter. It was one in a long line of letters he had exchanged with the Headmaster since the day he had made sure his offer to lift the curse was circulating in the rumour mills. They still were tap-dancing around one another, Dumbledore demanding information and promises as well as oaths from him, like he was the one holding something that Marvolo wanted to have and not the other way around. Maybe Marvolo simply should ask someone else for help.

Tonight was not the time to find the answer. He sighed, got up and went to bed.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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On the morning of the first of September – a Friday this year – the teaching staff of Hogwarts met for their annual meeting to discuss the last things needing to be sorted out before the students would be back.

Severus accepted a cup of strong coffee – sweetened with honey – from Pomona with a polite nod before he turned his attention to Minerva, who was waving a few letters around. As the Headmaster was currently at the Ministry – probably trying to gain some information before the belated August meeting was to take place – his deputy was conducting the meeting in his absence.

“First of all I want to discuss things related to one of the students in my House. As all of you already know, the son of James and Lily has been adopted by Lord Slytherin.”

Severus noted the dismayed expressions of most of the teachers around him. It had been obvious in the last days leading up to this term that most of them were conflicted about what to think of all that had happened since the last days of June. And the Potions Master could not blame them one bit. Remembering back, how he had felt and what he had thought, he could understand the ire being uneasy and questioning the intentions of Lord Slytherin. Maybe it was up to him, as one of Mr. Slytherin’s tutors, to reassure them of the boy’s safety.

“I received another letter from him,” Minerva went on. “He demands that his heir be addressed as Mr. Slytherin by us teachers. He refers to one of the older bylaws stating that the guardian of a student belonging to more than one House decides on which name is to be used when addressing the student.” Severus had to suppress a smile at the Transfiguration Professor’s annoyed tone of voice.

Pomona looked like she wanted to add a comment about that but was stopped by an upheld hand from Minerva. “I thoroughly researched this claim with the help of Irma.” The witch with her stern bun nodded to the librarian, who nodded in return, looking grim. “It seems that there once was a student who was heir to three houses, and addressing him with all the names was cumbersome and impractical in class. The rule was added to make it legal for the professors of that time to leave out all but one name. I’m afraid we will have to adhere to Lord Slytherin’s wishes in this.”

The murmuring in the staffroom quickly settled down again as Minerva got another letter out of the stack of parchment in front of her. “Poppy, Lord Slytherin also sent this letter for you.” A little surprised, the medi-witch accepted the sealed envelope from her old friend. “Judging by what was written in the letter to me, the one you have contains details of Mr. Slytherin’s health and details about the healers he is seeing.”

Poppy mouthed _healers_ and quickly opened the letter to read it then and there.

Severus was quite informed about the state of Mr. Slytherin’s health, he was the one brewing the potions the boy was still taking. And he had been in a position to see him shoot up like a weed over the summer. Once again guilt made his stomach churn over the fact that his wilful blindness had let him miss such an obvious case of neglect.

“Lord Slytherin also requested that we make it possible for a Squib healer to visit with his heir at least every other week. Any suggestions?” The way she spoke the Dark Lord’s official title
amused Severus greatly. He almost was tempted to wager with someone how long the deputy Headmistress would be able to keep this level of animosity alive. Sadly, there was no one there that would appreciate such a wager. Maybe he could get Lucius to agree to a bet. With his position on the board of governors, he was in a position to observe.

“If Lord Slytherin can organize someone to apparate the healer to the gates on prearranged dates, I see no problem. There certainly is room in one of the isolation rooms in the infirmary, or in one of the empty classrooms?” This logical and pragmatic solution came – predictably, Severus thought – from the Head of House of Ravenclaw.

“That might actually work, Filius.” Minerva nodded, wrote something down on a piece of parchment right in front of her, and moved on to the next topic: the schedules.

The plans were passed around and they all had a good look at which groups they had to teach when, this year. Severus sighed as he saw the way the first-years were grouped this time. It was Slytherin together with Gryffindor, and Ravenclaw with Hufflepuff. Again this way. As Minerva asked for comments and questions, he quickly started to speak. The way all the others sat back in their chairs, it was obvious that this was as much tradition by now as was the meeting itself. “Why, by all the Founders, are the first-years again paired Slytherin with Gryffindor? Do I need to stress – again – that this is the worst possible pairing for a beginners’ class of brewing? Until they learn the most basic of safety procedures and get a little older – and hopefully a little more mature – placing them together with volatile potion ingredients, open flames, and one another into one room is utter madness.” Severus spoke with fervour, as he did every year. But it had been not long after his first year of teaching that he had understood the Headmaster’s reasoning for this pairing.

“Albus insists, as you well know, Severus,” Minerva said with a hint of sympathy in her voice. Severus sat down again with a huff. “One of these days there will be disaster brewing on opposing ends of my classroom and I will be unable to save all of those little dunderheads.”

That the old meddling wizard would risk the students’ lives to make sure that the little Gryffindors started out their Hogwarts career hating their Potions Master and their Slytherin classmates, in stilling the rivalry as early as Albus was able. Severus still had trouble wrap ping his head around that realisation. Only once had he dared ask the Headmaster for his reasons for insist ing on this pairing. The ancient wizard had claimed he wanted to prevent the meek Hufflepuffs from being crushed by the more boisterous Gryffindors when Severus himself had to be so strict to maintain order in the teaching of this dangerous subject. That there was one more possible combinations – the Hufflepuffs together with the Slytherins, leaving the Ravenclaws to be paired with Gryffindor – had been dismissed without further thought.

After that Severus had repeated his protests every year, but had never asked the Headmaster for his reasons again. It was of no use, after all.

A few more changes were made to the schedule – one of them to allow Mr. Slytherin to attend a fourth-year Ancient Runes class – before they moved on to new professors and replacements, as well as plans for who would stay over the holidays to keep an eye on the castle.

“As you all probably noticed, our new teacher for Defence against the Dark Arts, Dolores Umbridge, has not yet arrived. She sent an owl late yesterday evening stating that she would arrive in time for the welcoming feast and sorting today.”

This announcement was met with uneasy silence. They all did not expect much from this new professor. The last decades had not instilled any hope that a witch or wizard picking up the post that was rumoured to be cursed would stay long, and the repeated death, injury, or loss of
reputation had scared away the more competent in this field. That the Ministry had to appoint a professor because the Headmaster had not been able to find someone for the post only stressed the problem.

“Hagrid is still on vacation, but Professor Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank has agreed to step in for him until his return. At the moment she is out on the grounds checking on the inhabitants of the forest.”

They talked about patrol schedules, who the new prefects were, the results of the OWLs of the previous year, the prospect of being rid of the Weasley twins after this year, and other topics of interest, until they called an end to the meeting and went on their respective ways. Most had still to unpack and prepare their quarters. Severus intended to read in silence as long as the students were not back. He always tried to use the last hours of silence to the best of his abilities.

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Minerva watched her colleagues go and wondered about what this year would bring. Albus had been distracted since Harry had been forcefully adopted by a resurrected and cleared-of-all-crimes You-Know-Who, they had a horrible woman as a professor this year, and she was overworked already. And it was only the start of a new term.

Her eyes were trained on Severus. He seemed to feel better, but appeared apprehensive. She had learned to read him quite well over the years. When Mr. Potter had returned from the maze and told of what had happened to him, she had feared for Severus’ safety. That he was going back to spying had been a certainty after the disaster with the stone. But she never would have thought that spying would improve the man’s mood and health.

If Severus was not still as invested in keeping Harry safe as he always had been, she would suspect him of having changed sides again. But it simply could not be, could it?

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Like every year on the first of September, Gregory was running through the house to find all his things, even if his mother had reminded him every day for the last week that he needed to pack his trunk for school. Quintus ate his breakfast in silence, listening to his son running around and his wife scolding the boy for his carelessness. But Quintus was quite happy.

A few days ago he had been frozen with fear, quivering in his boots, thinking about things to say to avert the fate awaiting him. Or the fate he had thought was awaiting him. He and Crabbe had made a terrible blunder, they had lost sight of their Lord’s heir, and a lowlife had tried to kidnap the boy. After the child had been back, safe at home, they had been called to their Lord, the now invisible mark on his arm burning.

Once they had arrived, the expected punishment had turned into a strategic debriefing. Their Lord had wanted to know what had gone wrong that day, and how to prevent further problems like that in the future. They both had experience as bouncers at a few clubs, guards for some that ventured into the dangerous parts of forests to collect potions ingredients, and guards on occasion for musicians, Quidditch players, and others that were reasonably famous. But guarding a teenager as
well known as the so-called Boy-Who-Lived... that was new.

And so they had started a discussion – both he and Crabbe waiting to be cursed at any moment – coming up with a plan to avoid repeating the mistakes that had been made. Outings into public places would never again occur when they knew the place would be packed with people. They would go with more than one pair of guards, and their Lord’s heir would have to be drilled in proper behaviour, like keeping close to his guards.

Chuckling, Quintus finished his meal and started with cleaning up. He still had trouble believing all the changes. But it seemed to work. So who was he to question the way their Lord decided to reach their goals or command his people?

Twenty minutes before the train was about to depart for Hogwarts, Quintus took the trunk by side-along apparation to the station, while his wife took their son. How fast time was passing, it felt like yesterday that they had made this journey for the first time, and now Gregory would start to prepare for his OWLs. He was growing up so fast.

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Marvolo felt nostalgic. It had been the summer after his last year at Hogwarts that he had been on platform 9 ¾ for the last time. And now here he was again. He and Henry had apparated to a small alley near King’s Cross and had walked into the station and through the barrier. The way he always had arrived there, the way all the families arrived that were not living in the magical world, the way Henry had arrived here the last few years. Others apparated directly onto the platform or used the one F loo that was installed in a remote corner. As both options needed permission to be used, only those that could pay the fees could use the options that made evading all Muggles possible.

The platform was filled with students and parents, younger siblings, and aunts and uncles. They were watched from all around, but most were occupied with saying goodbye to those that would leave for school or stay behind.

Before Henry could run off to search for his friends, Marvolo moved the trunk – a new one of the best quality available – into a still empty compartment. They had arrived early so Henry would get to pick a compartment, and Marvolo could make sure it was safe. In the relative privacy of the compartment, Marvolo got two shrunken items out of the pockets of his over-robe. “I know you wanted to take all your art supplies. Maybe these can tide you over until the holidays.” He felt a little ridiculous – giving a gift to the boy he once had tried to kill and now had adopted – but before the boy would be back at Hogwarts under the influence of Albus Dumbledore, he wanted to make a gesture to reinforce his image as a caring adult.

And he liked to see the child smile.

“Thank you, sir,” Henry said with a genuine smile, accepting the small sketchpad and a tin with high quality charcoal pieces. There were small runes scribbled on them that, once removed, would return the items back to their original size.

“I want to receive regular letters. And remember that you can go to Severus for help if you should be in need of aid. Do not get involved in any mad schemes. Am I clear?”
With a small cheeky smirk and green eyes sparkling, his son answered “As you will not be plotting something to get rid of me, I hope I can stay out of trouble.”

“If you feel someone is trying to get you into trouble, tell me. Immediately! It is a possibility that someone may be trying to get to me, using you.”

The teenager rolled his eyes, but nodded. “I remember the lecture, sir. And I really will try to stay out of trouble.”

Marvolo knew that his son was sincere. But he also knew that trouble had a tendency to find the boy. He was really glad that Severus was loyal to him and working at Hogwarts. Otherwise he would have had trouble letting his son, heir and horcrux leave for the school.

So many things had changed since he had his body back. Sometimes it felt longer than merely two months. Now he had to hurry if he wanted to be finished with his paperwork before the August Wizengamot meeting was to start.

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Harry watched as Marvolo left the train and nodded before quickly leaving the station. He clutched his new sketchpad with his left hand in his robe pocket. It felt surreal to be returning to Hogwarts. Not so long ago he had been on his way to the Ministry, getting adopted, fearing to be killed within minutes of leaving the place with the man he knew as Lord Voldemort.

And now here he was, about to leave for school, the one thing he had wished for more than anything to get away from his aunt and uncle, and already missing the place that now was home.

Hermione would be here soon, as would be Theodore, Draco, Daphne, Neville, and probably all the Weasleys. It promised to be a challenge to get all those he would like to spend time with organised without starting a shouting match.

One thing about the new school year was something Harry was looking forward to: no more lessons with Trelawney. He was really happy about that. But how the students would react to his being adopted, how Ron would behave, what that Umbridge person would do... He really was unsure if he would manage to keep out of trouble. Somehow he had a feeling that it would be difficult. A woman ousted from her position at the Ministry, demoted to be a teacher at a school and therefore in a position of power over him, the son and heir of the one Lord working against her laws and goals. That was not a comfortable position for him.

Harry sighed and pushed his new-found politically analytic mind aside, he was here to spend time with his friends. Being part of the traditional train ride up to Hogwarts. For a moment he wondered: trains were a comparatively new invention. How had the students reach ed Hogwarts before the train had been installed? He snorted and retreated into the compartment. If he really wanted to know, he just had to ask Hermione, the story about the Express probably was written down somewhere in the enormous Hogwarts: a History. And Hermione had read the book more than once.

The wait for his friends did not take long. Neville was the first to arrive, and soon they were talking like the good friends they had become over the summer.
One step into the hall of Griffin House, Marvolo felt the call from one of his men. Sighing, Marvolo changed direction to his bedroom to change into some dark robes, a more intimidating Dark Lord type of robes and not the casual ones he had selected to drop his son off at the Hogwarts Express. This day promised to get a bit hectic.

As he finally reached the audience chamber – the big parlour he had changed to be used for big meetings and where they had tortured the traitor – he saw Amycus standing over a bundle on the floor. So there was a really good reason for the man to call for him. He had been thinking what he would do if he had been called needlessly. He needed to find a way to punish errors that did not involve dangerous torture. There was not really enough time to recruit replacements if he accidentally killed one of his Death Eaters.

“What do you have there, Amycus?” Marvolo asked, walking casually up to his follower. Whirling around to face his Lord, Amycus almost instantly fell to his knees, bowing low to the ground. As fast as he had dropped, the redhead was standing again. Clearing his throat, the male part of the Carrow twins pointed his hand at the bundle of rags on the floor. “One of my contacts reached out yesterday night, told me he met a man bragging about a failed attempt to kidnap a ‘lordling’. Said the man matched the description I had given him. I picked him,” he stabbed a finger in direction of the bundle moving with shallow breaths, “up from a hiding place and brought him here. I think that it could be him, my Lord.”

Using a push of wandless magic, Marvolo turned the bundle on its back, exposing the face of the man. He matched Henry’s description. A weak stinging hex made the excuse for a wizard startle awake and yelp. Marvolo used the moment the wizard had his eyes wide in fear to slip effortlessly into the man’s mind.

It did not take him long to find memories of his son in the weak wizard’s mind. It had not been a planned assault but a spur-of-the-moment decision. Amycus had found the right one. Marvolo quickly checked the man’s mind for other memories that might prove useful. What the man himself thought of as important was uninteresting. Small thieveries, selling illegal potions to desperate people, bad forgery.

Marvolo backed out of the mess of a mind, sneering. He held his hand, palm up, demandingly out to Amycus, who dropped back to one knee, giving over his arm, the wrist exposed. Concentrating on the Death Eaters currently searching for the man that had dared lay a hand on his son, Marvolo touched his finger to the tiny dark mark that appeared at his touch. He called for them to come as fast as possible.

To use the time they would be waiting for the others to arrive, Marvolo turned to Amycus, ignoring the man shivering on the floor. “Can his disappearance be linked to you?” One of the most important rules of Slytherin House – at Hogwarts and for the actual family – was, do not get caught. He planned to follow this rule to the letter.

“No, my Lord,” Amycus said with certainty in his voice. “My contact is a vampire known to prey on those that prey on children or hurt them. He was in the shady excuse of a bar this idiot was bragging in about his attempt. My vampire friend saw him, made the connection, and shadowed him to a small side alley. If someone misses him, they will think he ended up as a snack.”

Nodding approvingly, Marvolo walked the short distance to stand over the one who had tried to
harm his son. A foul stench was rising from the man, and he was shivering, blue eyes looking fearful ly up at Marvolo. There had been many situations like this in the past. He had missed it, at least a little bit. But it did not really match the image of the upstanding member of society. He just had to make the best of the few opportunities he would get.

“It was not smart of you to try and harm my heir.” His tone was calm, detached, uninterested. The man on the floor – a nice one with inlaid floral patterns – got even paler.

“You can’t do a thing. Have done nothing wrong. Stick to the laws! A Lord on the Wizengamot,” mumbled the wizard, trembling and with fear in his eyes.

Marvolo snorted. Did that filcher really think that just because he had a place on the Wizengamot, he had to keep to the laws? Well, the wizard’s actions the other day had indicated he was not the smartest kneazle in the litter. “You will soon learn that you do not know as much as you had thought.”

One by one the other searchers arrived, bowing low to their Lord, and surrounding them in a circle. Most had donned the full regalia, dark robes, masks, and all. The captive quickly realized how serious this was and started to plead, whimpering more than anything else.

When all finally had arrived, Marvolo stalked to stand in the circle. He had to make this quick, there was not much time until the meeting, and he still had to finish his paperwork. The joys of handling an estate and trying to rebuild one from nothing.

“As you can see, your work was successful.” That was met with cheers and a feeling of smugness in the room. “Amycus found him. You all get to curse him once. As a reward.” He let his evil smile come out and the foul stench reaching him from the floor intensified. Disgusting filth of a wizard. “Do not kill him.” With that he stepped back and let them have their fun.

While he watched his Death Eaters taking turns casting curses, the victim screaming with a high pitch fitting for any small girl, he conjured a bottle and cast a charm on it to preserve the contents in the state they were in the moment they were put into the bottle.

After all of the search team had had their turn, the one that had tried to harm Henry was left a sobbing mess on the floor of the grand ballroom.

Marvolo stepped forward, pointing his bone-white wand at the man. “Do you think you can deliver my thanks to your contact, Amycus?” He cast a spell that would transfer all the blood out of the wizard and into the bottle he was holding, while leaving what would appear like a vampire’s bite to all ways of investigation.

“I should be able to track him down easily enough, my Lord,” Amycus answered, sounding like he would be happy to do just that.

Floating the filled and sealed bottle over to Amycus, Marvolo ignored the now dead wizard on the floor. “Find him and convey my thanks. If he needs something I can gran…” He trailed off, making sure Amycus knew what he wanted to say without actually telling him what that was. It was a way to circumvent some of the truth-indicating spells that some people used. An area of grey they could not clearly indicate. Better to be cautious. Aurors would come speak to him once the body was found.

“Macnair, get rid of the trash at one of the known vampire dumps, will you?” With a wave of his hand he dismissed the group and made his way out of the house. He had paperwork to complete. One of the weaving mills belonging to his son needed new workers, and Marvolo wanted the
manager to look into employing some squibs. And there were some investments to evaluate for
the money Lucius had lent him to build up a fortune for the Slytherin family. Papers to read,
decisions to make. It had been easier just taking the money the rich families had handed him.
Learning to manage an estate was proving to be both interesting and time-consuming.
So much to do and so little time. He sighed and apparated over to Griffin House.

oooOOooo

Shortly before the train would start its journey up north, the compartment Harry was sitting in
was filled with laughter and happy chatting. Beside Neville and Harry, Theo – he insisted on being
called that by Harry, and the green-eyed teen had granted the Slytherin the privilege of calling him
Harry – and Daphne were sitting in there, the Weasley twins visiting and telling about their product
range they would be testing this year with the help of the Hogwarts student population. A test with C
anary Cream-filled muffins had brought on the current bout of laughter. Neville’s befuddled
expression was just too funny not to laugh.

“Harry?” a well-known female voice asked from the door.

“Hermione!” Harry happily exclaimed. “That badge suits you.” He was happy for his friend and
sure she would be good at her job as one of the prefects.

Hermione blushed, obviously happy with her new role as well. “I’ll make my way over to the
prefects’ carriage soon. We will get our orientation on the rules there, what we have to do, and all
that.” She looked around the compartment, greeting the Slytherins with a nod and a murmur of
their names, to get the same in return from them both. Their relationship was still on shaky
ground, her change in status just too sudden for the others to adapt to. “I’m happy to know that you
won’t be sitting by yourself. Have Fred and George told you that Ron was made prefect as well?”

Eyes wide as saucers, Harry shook his head. Before he could say anything, the twins started to
talk. “Didn’t see what’s so important about that. Mom was over the moon.” “Of course! All her
boys prefects now.” They rolled their eyes, startling a few chuckles out of the others, because they
never were even close to getting that position.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Harry said and smiled at Hermione. “Greet Draco.” That got him a
light glare from Hermione before she strode away to meet with the other prefects as well as the
Head Boy and Girl.

The train started to roll, jostling all the occupants of the compartment. The twins stood, making
exaggerated bows. “We’re off to see Lee and the others. See you later!”

The rest of the train ride was enjoyable. After a while Luna Lovegood joined them in their
compartment – her wand behind one of her ears, a necklace of butterbeer corks around her neck –
mostly reading a magazine called “The Quibbler” upside down. No one dared to ask why she
was doing it. She did not engage in conversations much, but seemed happy to be there. A large
number of Slytherin students from each year stopped by to talk a moment with Harry – who was a
little exasperated over the political manoeuvring – politely and mostly about what his summer had
been like.
The teenagers played exploding snap and chess, and read their summer homework over to pass the time. If not for the steady interruptions by students to speak to the heir of Slytherin – ironic that he now was what all had thought him to be during that debacle with the C hamber back then – and those that walked by to throw dark looks at Harry – those were mostly Gryffindors – it would have been one of the nicer train rides.

When the door opened and Draco Malfoy, with his green prefect badge pinned to his robes, dropped unceremoniously into the seat by the door, Harry had un-shrunken his new sketch pad and was working on a sketch of Hedwig. The blond looked like he had a foul taste in his mouth and relaxed into the seat.

Harry ignored the blond, knowing that nothing got him to talk faster than being ignored. During mostly boring lessons on dancing and finer manners, one got to know the other students.

“Not sure if I’m still happy with having made prefect,” the new Slytherin prefect sighed. “I think you got the better deal, Henry. That meeting was dull, and patrolling the train is not as much fun as I thought it would be. Having Granger looming over us all, making sure all of us stick to the rules.” Draco glared at Theo, who was snickering and trying to hide it. “And I’m not sure why Weasley was made the Gryffindor prefect.”

“Maybe to balance out Hermione?” Harry ventured a guess. It became easier and easier to speak with Malfoy, even if he stayed cautious. It most likely was a political move to get to be friendly with him, the strained politeness the son of Lucius Malfoy – one of the Death Eaters that had been on the graveyard, Harry had trouble forgetting that – showed every time he interacted with Hermione was a dead give-away of that.

“I guess the Headmaster named them to help shield you, Harry,” Theo suddenly chimed in.

“That seems possible,” Neville agreed, nodding earnestly, finding another spot for his little cactus for the nth time.

“If he did, I’m not sure it’ll work the way it was planned.” Harry waved that away, he had no intention of messing with it now, or thinking about the reactions he would have to bear as soon as they reached the school. Even trying to ignore them, he had noticed the many students giving him angry, dark, or confused looks. Those only looking curious, like Cho Chang the Ravenclaw seeker, were a nice change in the long line of students.

“But that isn’t even the worst,” Draco whined, getting the ir attention back to him. And Harry was glad about it, he did not want the attention, so let Draco have it. “They made Pansy a prefect too! I’ll have to spend more time with her!”

That brought on a round of friendly ribbing from both Theo and Daphne. It seemed that Pansy Parkinson had a crush on Draco and was trying to get the boy interested enough so he would ask his parents to set up a contract with her. It was obvious that this was not something Draco would do, and he did not seem to enjoy the girl’s attempts to change his mind.

Harry returned to his sketch, quite happy with the current situation and trying to distract himself so he would not think about all the things that could go wrong once the train arrived. This was a first. Normally he only wished for the train ride not to end on the way back to the Dursleys at the start of summer. But now he wished for the ride to last, so he would not return to school and all the problems he felt were waiting for him there. Having more knowledge about politics and what others might do to get power had never felt like something he would wish not to have. But now he wished he could be ignorant still. It promised to be a difficult year. Thinking about the book hidden among his robes, the one with charms for the young bachelor, he blushed and concentrated
on sketching. It would be an interesting year, of that he was sure.

“Madame Bones! So glad I’m meeting you here.” And he was. Marvolo turned to walk beside the formidable witch in the unfortunately coloured Ministry Wizengamot robes and fell into step with her.

“Lord Slytherin.” The Head of the Department of Law Enforcement nodded her head. “What is so urgent that you are so happy to see me?” She seemed distracted and fiddled with the folders she held under her arm.

“I have a problem I need a second opinion on, and had hoped you would be so kind as to give yours,” Marvolo answered her inquiry with a polite nod of his head. They walked slowly through the bustling corridors of the Ministry on their way to the chamber the Wizengamot was meeting in.

“And what is this problem?” She seemed not really interested, but Marvolo was sure that once he had started to explain, that would change quickly.

“You might have heard the rumour that I’m searching for someone who tripped some old spells I had set up somewhere?” He gave her a questioning look, and she nodded in confirmation. “I have learned that Albus Dumbledore is the one that tripped the protections on that place. And it seems that he found someone to help him, as he is still alive.”

The look she gave him at that seemed to ask, “That nasty a protection?” and he looked down in a show of guilt, taking a deep breath as if he had to force himself to continue despite his feelings about what had happened in the past.

“I offered to lift the curse he will die from if he does not let me help.” He sighed in irritation, that he would feel frustrated over someone rejecting his help. He never would have thought that something like this would happen.

“In fact, he wants me to swear an oath that would make it impossible for me to even disagree with him,” Marvolo scoffed. He did not know what the old man wanted to achieve with that. He just had to know that no sane wizard or witch would make an unbreakable vow never to attack another in any way. Even a discussion that got heated or passionate could be interpreted as an attack.

Amelia’s gaze snapped to the wizard walking beside her. “How is it worded?”

Inwardly smirking – now he had her hooked – Marvolo furrowed his brow. “Before he will allow me to cast magic at him to lift the curse, he wants me to make an unbreakable vow that I will never attack him in any way.” He did not manage to keep his feelings of incredulousness out of his voice, but felt it was an appropriate reaction even from a law-abiding Lord of the Wizengamot.

“And how is it that those protections could be triggered by him?” She gave him a pointed look, clearly wanting more information from Marvolo. And he felt that he would have to give her the information she wanted to have. Maybe this would help in getting the horcrux out of Gringotts if he managed to make it sound like he wanted to get rid of dark objects he had given to his followers.

“There are many dangerous things still laying around. I started with those I thought were more likely to be found.” He shrugged apologetically, he was just one man, so there was no way he
could dismantle so much all on his own in such a short time.

“If you tell me, I might be able to get the Aurors to help.”

Before the witch had even finished, Marvolo started to shake his head. “No, I … I made damn sure
that no one but me could dismantle the wards and spells layered as protection.” He gave her a weak
smile “But thanks for the offer. If I find myself in a position that I need help, or a situation where
others can lend a hand, I will come to you, Madame Bones.”

She huffed, not entirely sure she was being told the truth, but Marvolo was sure that she tended to
believe him.

They finally reached the Wizengamot chambers, and Marvolo walked up to the Ministry seats with
Amelia Bones. “Can you help me with the problem of a man dying that refuses my help?”

She placed the folders on the bench and turned to Marvolo standing beside her in his best family
robes. “Approach his friends with your concern over him declining help. Offer another way to
reassure him that you will only lift the curse. Maybe some oath that you will only cast magic to lift
the curse during a specific meeting… And if my department can be of help to get rid of some of
the legacy that was left behind, all you have to do, Lord Slytherin, is ask.”

Marvolo nodded, forcing a grateful smile onto his face, he was really happy with her advice – after
all, he was not always sure what way would be the respectable one, he needed a refresher course on
that – and happy that he had managed to get his desire to help and get rid of the legacy still lurking
in the back, out into the open, into another set of ears.

As the others started to trickle into the room, Marvolo walked over to sit in the Slytherin seat, after
he had cast a cushioning charm on the bench of silver. He would have to sit on it for hours, most
likely, he did not want to be stiff at the end of the day.

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Amelia sorted through her files, contemplating the strange encounter with Lord Slytherin. She just
did not know what to make of him. He seemed so earnest, like he really wanted to help. But she
just could not believe him. Not truly. In fact she felt as if she were walking in a moor surrounded
by mist, walking without direction or even a destination in mind. Albus was not sharing
information. The Minister was hedging and not commenting on anything, only repeating that Lord
Slytherin was a new person and not He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. It was frustrating.

But that he wanted to lift the curse that had the Ministry talking for over a week now, speculating
on who was affected by it? That gave her hope that the man would not act too differently from
other politicians. Not a rousing endorsement, but at least an assurance that there would be no overt
violence this time.

Sighing, she sat down watching as all the Lords and Ladies came in to take their place, gossiping
with each other. It might be the first of September, but this was the August meeting. They tended
to reschedule it, as most of the members of the body were away on holidays during the summer,
when the children returned from school.

All in all, there were only a few simple topics on the agenda. Simple topics besides the one she
was sure would bring them all to their feet shouting. The controversy was just too big for it to stay
a calm and reasonable debate. She was not looking forward to it.

She watched as all attendants walked into the chamber, and Lord Slytherin greeted those that had been Death Eaters in the last war. They all had claimed that they had been forced to become part of the organization, saying they had been under the Imperius. She never had believed that story, but the way they were interacting – all polite distance and cautious dancing around each other – the story was either true or they all were supreme actors. Considering they all were Lords and politicians brought up to be exactly that, she still was sure they were actors and the story was just that. A story.

They all settled down when Chief Warlock Abbott called the chamber to order. They started with the easy points. So Amelia stood and started to talk about the trials they had to schedule. There had been a case of a brawl in a bar with destroyed furniture, and one of attempted thievery. The accused claimed that the experimental anti-theft charm used was too sensitive, and of course the owner of the shop disagreed.

Each trial was overseen by three members of the Wizengamot, and those were assigned by random selection, one of them being rejected only if he or she was related or in any way connected to one of the parties involved. Lord Slytherin was not one of those selected and did not seem upset about it. As no one liked to be forced to sit in on the more boring trials, and those new to the Wizengamot seldom were selected, it was to be expected and nothing suspicious. After that she sat down, full of dread over the next topic on the agenda.

“Lady Marchbanks has brought forward a petition to examine the appointment of Dementors as guards of Azkaban.” The Chief Warlock moved on to the next topic, getting louder towards the end, as the level of noise rose significantly. “Lady Marchbanks, if you would.” The floor was given to the elderly witch to speak about her petition.

“Thank you, Chief Warlock,” the witch with white hair artfully styled, wearing her family robes, nodded to the man presiding over the assembly before turning to speak to all of the people attending. “Considering the fact that Dementors have tried to kill several heirs and a renowned Potions Master, whether under orders from someone in the Ministry, or acting on their own, I think it is utter madness to keep them in charge of our prison. They could be ordered to kill any of the prisoners they are to guard, or just decide to do it because they want to.” She was talking with passion, strong gestures underlining her points, eyes filled with determination. Amelia noticed that many of those traditionally thought of as light and neutral were nodding almost unconsciously. “I propose to move them to the empty part of the island until it is clear why those Dementors did what they did. To prevent them from doing further harm.”

There were murmurs of agreement and a few of doubt.

Quickly the floor was given over to Lord Malfoy. As one of the fathers of the heirs attacked, it was only natural that he would speak.

Giving the immaculate image of a pure-blood Lord, Malfoy stood straight in his powder blue robes, his long blond hair tamed with a silver barrette, he waited a few moments to capture the audience’s attention. “I understand the urge to do something, anything, not only waiting for a result. My son was attacked. I can hardly stand feeling like I am doing nothing.” He got a few nods all around, most of them were parents and knew how it felt to be unable to help. “But acting just to not feel helpless anymore can be dangerous.” His cane made a clicking sound on the stone floor as he thrust it down to emphasize his point. “I would rather have the aurors who would have to take up guard duty, helping in sorting the mess in the filing room. So we would know sooner who it was that sent Dementors after school children. Let us concentrate on getting the facts and not on
blind activism, doing something just for the sake of not being seen as not acting fast enough.”

Amelia followed others speaking for or against the petition, seeing the majority's opinion change with each speech. The way she saw it this could go either way. And she was not sure what it was she wanted. It was not a comfortable thought that someone might have ordered the attack. But the thought that the Dementors had acted of their own free will, against explicit orders, was even worse. From her position as head of the DMLE she would rather see nothing changed until they knew for sure what the cause of the attack was.

Amelia was surprised when, as the last to speak, Lord Slytherin raised his wand. Her brow rose up in silent wonder at what the man would say. Whatever he said, she was sure that he might reveal a bit about the way he would act in the future. She did not dare to predict his actions by what she knew of Voldemort’s way of acting in the past.

“Are you all serious?” the young looking wizard with wavy brown hair brushing his shoulders asked of all present. “I was happy that you were able to look past who you knew me as. But I did not realize that this behaviour was not something you had to work at, but something you always do.” Amelia was intrigued by this approach, she never would have guessed that he would dare to bring his former identity into this debate, or any other, for that matter.

“Many of you probably were part of the judges that decided what should happen with those men and women that were followers of Voldemort. Those dangerous people are now in Azkaban. Only still there because Dementors keep them confused and weak.” His brown eyes sparkled with fury and repressed anger. “If you remove the Dementors from the prison, you will enable them to regain their senses. They are dangerous even now. I should know. Even as I wish I could forget, I still remember them all at their worst. It would be foolish to risk them escaping.” His tone was intense, capturing the audience with his words. Amelia was sure he believed what he said, but he sparked an explosive reaction in the others.

As she had predicted, soon all were on their feet shouting. The divide between those arguing to keep the Dementors where they were and those who wanted them to move out of the prison was like a chasm.

After several minutes the Chief Warlock managed to get order restored and called for a vote. Anxiously Amelia counted the wands raised at each question. It was by a slim majority that Lady Marchbanks’ petition was accepted and the Dementors were to be removed as guards from Azkaban.

She watched as an exasperated Lord Slytherin walked out of the chamber, shaking his head, clearly unhappy with the outcome of this session.

Sighing, Amelia gathered her papers. She had guard shifts to organise. The Minister had been quite clear that he wanted the Head of the DMLE on this and not only the head of the aurors. She would have to contact Rufus, but if she knew him, she was sure that the man would be still in his office, waiting for the outcome of this meeting.

There was much to do.
Marvolo was still shaking his head as he reached Malfoy Manor with Lucius in tow. “I want you to take a few of the others and check on the old safe houses. See which ones are still standing and unoccupied, and place alarms to notify us if someone enters them.” He did not need to add that he wanted Lucius to place some of those charms he had invented that specifically targeted those bearing his mark. Like the wards he used to keep those not marked out, he had others that had helped to organise his troops. “They all know that I am back, but they do not know about our change in how we want to reach our goal. Should they manage to escape the prison, we must make sure that we find them before they can cause harm.” He still could not believe that they really had voted to remove the Dementors from Azkaban. Even if it was a temporary measure until the investigation into the attack was finished, it was a foolish move. He couldn't decide if it was a dastardly plot to derail his plans for a more or less peaceful overturning of the Ministry, or the misled attempt of a Gryffindor to “do the right thing”. And he was not even sure which one would be the worse.

Rubbing at his brow, he turned to find a house-elf offering him a glass of fire whiskey. He accepted the glass and sat down on one of the chairs in Lucius’ study. “What a nightmare.”

Hesitantly sitting down himself, Lucius cautiously started to speak. “Are you sure, my Lord, that an escape of those imprisoned is to be expected?”

Marvolo smirked at the obvious reluctance of the blond Lord to question something his Lord had said and sipped from his glass. Then he sighed. “Sadly, yes, Lucius. Black managed to escape, with Dementors around. Sure, he was aided by his animagus form in keeping his sanity. But your sister-in-law had left sanity behind a few years before my fall. I do think, once the haze of constant Dementor exposure recedes, she will recover enough to attempt flight.”

Before Marvolo could vent more of his frustration over the idiots and their actions, the others arrived, and they started to discuss ways to act should those of them imprisoned manage to escape.

Marvolo was still unsure if he should attempt to help them flee, get them out of the country, get them a new identity. Or if he should try to get them back into prison should they manage to leave without help.

It was late at night before Marvolo made it back to Griffin House, which felt empty now, even with all the elves still there. Attributing his uneasy feeling to the fact he had last been alone as a spirit floating around, powerless and desperate after over a decade without a body, Marvolo went to bed, taking a light sleeping draught to be sure that he would get enough rest. He tended to keep thinking and not finding sleep after a day like this.

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Finally they reached Hogwarts, and the students started to leave the train. Harry trailed after his new acquaintances over the platform and through the station to the square where the carriages were waiting.

Harry mustered the leathery-looking winged horses. Thestrals. If Marvolo had not spoken about them in one of their discussions of what the next year at Hogwarts would bring, he would have been surprised by them. Wondering why the horseless carriages suddenly were pulled by the eerie-looking animals. Another thing no one had thought about telling him. Most of the adults had seen someone die, they all knew about the thestrals. But not one of them thought about speaking
about them to Harry.

“They are beautiful, aren’t they?” the dreamy voice of Luna Lovegood spoke next to him.

Harry turned to the blonde girl, her hair hanging around her unkempt and untamed, and smiled. “They are.” He was sad, to see them now was only possible because he had seen Cedric die. As interesting as they were to look at, he would have gladly foregone seeing them for Cedric to be still alive.

“Thanks for one of the more peaceful rides on the train.” The girl smiled serenely and clambered into the carriage, closely followed by a bemused Harry. She was odd, but he liked being around her nonetheless.

Now he had to face the music. He sighed, somehow, he was sure it was going to be bad.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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On the way from the entrance to the Great Hall to their preferred seats at the Gryffindor table, Harry and Hermione scanned the teachers' table.

“Hagrid is missing,” Harry murmured, as he could not spot the half-giant among the other teachers. Hermione let her gaze drift over the head table and frowned at the one witch with her curly grey hair, clad all in pink, sitting next to the Headmaster.

“Isn't that the witch we met in the entry hall on the day of Sirius’ trial?” the young bushy-haired witch asked, sitting down on the bench in front of one of the still-empty golden plates.

“Umbridge. The Ministry appointed her for the position of Defence professor.” Harry shook his head and sat down, looking incredulous as a third-year gave him a dark look and slid along the bench further away from them.

“What's the toad doing here?” one of the twins asked, falling gracelessly onto the bench on the other side of the table.

“Defence teacher,” Harry repeated and ignored a sixth-year who shoved his way more roughly than necessary past the place Harry was sitting.

“Seriously?” the twins looked at the head table and seemed disappointed. “Our last year, and we get a lousy toad as a teacher?”

Harry snorted and settled down for the sorting. The door opened again and Professor McGonagall entered the hall, followed by a line of small first-years, who looked terribly nervous. Concentrating on the hat sitting on the stool the new students would sit on while they were being sorted by the hat, Harry ignored the whispering and the odd looks as well as his grumbling stomach. He could not wait for the feast to start. Ron sat next to his brothers, and Ginny was smiling at the green-eyed fifth-year, who was slightly puzzled by her behaviour. He had hoped her crush would have vanished by now.

As the hat began its song, Harry let his eyes wander over the little kids standing, waiting to be sorted. How many of them were living in the Muggle world? Was one of them the heir or heiress of one of the other founders? Marvolo had speculated that there might be others, since there was still a bench for Hufflepuff and Gryffindor empty in the Wizengamot chambers, there was family left able to claim the title.
Severus sat at the head table, watching as the new students shuffled in after Minerva in a neat line. As he did every year, he inspected the students and sorted them in his head, grouping them after what he guessed would be their Houses. His record was quite good and had only improved over the years.

He did not really listen to the Hat’s song. He never did. After all, the content of the song was essentially the same each year. Describing the characteristics of the four houses and how he, the Hat, had come to be. This year the Hat harped about unity between the houses, in a way he had last heard in his own years as a student.

Severus’ focus tonight was not on the Slytherin table, as usual after the summer – he knew those were not the people likely to cause trouble – but on the Gryffindors. He had a feeling that the house-mates of his Lord’s heir would be causing troubles for the boy. The other unknown factor this year was Dolores Umbridge. The Dark Lord’s orders concerning the current Defence against the Dark Arts Professor were specific. As the woman’s agenda concerning werewolves was diametrically opposite to the one the Dark Lord tried to push through, it was likely that the woman would target the only one under her power. Henry. It was Severus’ job to make sure the boy would not come to harm.

His orders concerning the Headmaster had been a lot more vague. The Potions Master had gathered that the old wizard was a threat to the young Slytherin heir. But why the boy was in danger of coming to harm through the actions or inactions of the Headmaster had not been explained.

Looking back over the years since Lily’s son had started school and what had happened, Severus was not sure if so much had changed. The gauntlet the old meddler had had assembled to ‘protect’ the stone was, in hindsight, nothing more than an obstacle course designed to be overcome by students. Or more specifically, one particular student. Considering the prophecy – of which Severus was not sure he wanted to know the full content – there was the distinct possibility that the Headmaster believed that the Boy-Who-Lived was to play a deciding role in thwarting the Dark Lord’s plans. If the man did, then it was reasonable to believe that he would get desperate now that he had lost control over the child.

The Hat had finished his song, and Severus clapped slowly along with the others. While one after the other students were called and took their turns under the old hat, Severus continued to think about all he had to keep in mind, only clapping when a student was sorted into Slytherin.

Finally the line of students was distributed among the four Houses, and the Headmaster declared that this was not the time to make speeches, sending them all to eat their fill. While Severus filled his plate with excellent steak, green beans, and others of his favourites, his colleagues started to chat about inconsequential things. Severus ate in silence, plotting ways to protect his Lord’s heir from the other Gryffindors from his position as the Head of Slytherin. Maybe he would have to enlist Minerva to help him. Or get the boy re-sorted. He snorted at that ridiculous thought – as far as he knew, there had never been a re-sorting and the stories told were just that, stories – and took another sip from his glass of wine. He promised himself a nice glass of red wine once he was in his chambers after this traditional exuberance.

Minerva watched with tepridation the tension among her Lions. Hermione and Harry – in her head she indulged herself in calling her favourite students by their given names – were at the receiving
ends of quite a few stares. Their being related to traditionally Slytherin families, or in Harry’s case, even heir to Slytherin himself, was not sitting well with the Gryffindors. But sadly, she had no real idea how to ease the tension. Maybe she could get Severus to help her out with that problem.

After a small serving of her favourite dessert – a junket with blueberries – she shifted her attention to the headmaster as Albus stood to give the usual announcements.

“To all the new students: Welcome! To all the others: Welcome back! Before you head back to your dormitories, let me make a few announcements.” Minerva smiled over the big gestures, only to wince at the blackened hand that was revealed as one of his over-long sleeves fell back from his fingertips to the elbow. He quickly lowered the arm so the hand was covered again, but she could see the concerned glances exchanged between a few Ravenclaws and those students sitting closer to the head table. Why Albus was waiting this long before accepting the help of Lord Slytherin to get rid of the curse, she did not understand. Each attempt from her to speak about it only ended with Albus bringing up an important topic related to the school.

“You all should take note that the Forbidden Forest is named so because it is forbidden to enter it, and for good reason. A few of the older students would do well to remember this as well. Mr. Filch has asked me – for the 462nd time, he said – to remind you that performing magic in the corridors in between classes is not allowed, and that there is a list of banned items that can be reviewed in Mr. Filch’s office during the regular office hours.” As was almost traditional, Argus grumbled into his non-existent beard at Albus’ way of phrasing this. It was only too clear that the Headmaster put no stock in this list and did not intend to enforce it. An ongoing sour spot for the caretaker, but a topic that arguing about was futile. Minerva had tried long enough.

“Furthermore, there are two changes to our staff. Professor Grubbly-Plank will take over the classes in Care of Magical Creatures,” the witch stood, bowed to the politely clapping students and sat down again, “and Madame Dolores Umbridge will assume the position as our Defence against the Dark Arts professor.” Another short splattering of clapping followed this pronouncement, and Albus started to talk about the Quidditch try-outs when he was interrupted by the pink witch. There was no other way to describe her, and so this moniker had quickly established itself among the faculty.

With a feeling of slight horror – never in all her years at Hogwarts had someone interrupted the headmaster! – that was shared by the others as far as she could see, Minerva turned in her chair so she could watch the short, pink witch giving a small speech.

“Thank you, Headmaster, for your friendly words of welcome!” Minerva had to suppress a shudder, this sugar-sweet tone was hard to tolerate. If Umbridge always spoke like that, the school was in for a year full of caries-damaged teeth.

“I’m happy to be back here at Hogwarts and delighted to see so many happy faces looking up at me.”

Happy was not a word that the Head of Gryffindor would have used to describe the students’ faces at the moment. Amused, bewildered, and aghast were much more fitting.

“I’m looking forward to getting to know you all and am sure that we will become the best of friends.”

Out of the corner of her eye Minerva saw Severus stiffening his posture. And she had to fight off an incredulous laugh herself. Keeping a professional working relationship with the pink witch might prove to be impossible. Her constant harrumphing and the over-sweet tone were grating on Minerva’s nerves, and she had only met her a couple of times.
As she changed her posture to one much more businesslike and her tone became harder, Minerva sharpened her focus. This was a first, a hint at her real self.

“While preparing for this position I realized that your previous instruction sadly lacked any structure. I’m happy to announce that I will be able to help you all overcome this sad situation with a methodically structured course I have devised for all the classes.” She smiled a so sugary-sweet smile that Minerva gripped the arm of her chair so tightly her knuckles turned white.

Giving a polite and surely insincere nod to Albus and the others, the Ministry-appointed professor continued in her clearly rehearsed speech. “We will no longer follow fleeting fashions with the lesson plans, or disregard traditions for merely the sake of advancement.”

Minerva let her gaze wander over the students, who were beginning to stop paying attention. The eyes of the Heads of House of Gryffindor and Slytherin met, and Minerva rolled her eyes. She had never hoped for the rumoured curse on the Defence position to be true. But she was tempted to wish ill on Dolores Umbridge. She managed to keep a professional mien, but only barely. Hopefully the pink witch would be finished soon, and Minerva could get back to her rooms and enjoy a tumbler of her favourite whiskey.

Finally Umbridge finished her speech – essentially saying that she thought all previous teachers of the subject had been incompetent idiots and she would rectify all problems single-handedly in one year – Albus send the students to their dorms, and the professors moved to exit the hall through the faculty entrance.

As she walked a few steps side-by-side with the Potions professor, Severus murmured for only her to hear, “I never thought I would wish for the peacock to be back.” Minerva snorted, and they parted ways.

ooOoo

After they finally could flee from the Great Hall and the endless chatter of too many children, Severus took his favourite route to the Slytherin common room, stopping by his quarters to get rid of his over-robe in exchange for a lighter one he often wore in the evening, and to give the prefects time to escort the new Slytherins there and explain the basics. He had informed the prefects that he would have to talk to all of the students, not something he normally did on the first evening. Most of the time they all were too tired to pay attention, so he talked to them on the first morning of classes. But as there was a weekend at the beginning of term this year, he had moved this meeting to the evening of the welcoming feast.

As he set foot into the common room – black walls where in the day green light would fall in through the waters of the lake – all the students were surrounding Theodore Nott and Draco Malfoy, as well as most of the others of Po… Slytherin’s year. They were asking various questions about the summer and what those who had come near the Slytherin heir knew about the circumstances. To their credit, Mr. Nott and Draco were keeping their answers to things that were harmless bits of informations. Nothing incriminating or things Henry Slytherin would like to keep private.

“I see you already are discussing the topic I want to talk about.” Severus drawled, quickly gaining the attention of the mass of students, getting them to turn so all eyes were trained on him.
Severus walked over to his customary seat near the fireplace, where he sat for one evening every week, there to help with homework and generally be available to his students. He was their Head of House and stood in for their parents as long as they stayed at the school. A responsibility he took seriously.

He sat gracefully and watched as the Slytherins settled down, the wide-eyed eleven-year-olds sitting on the floor and the thick rugs in the first row.

“You all have read the Prophet, have heard your parents talking. Harry Potter, Gryffindor and so-called Boy-Who-Lived, was adopted by Lord Slytherin and named his heir.” Severus let his dark eyes roam over the student’s faces, assessing who felt resentment over the facts and where problems might be waiting to happen.

“As he now is the Heir of Slytherin, you all should consider him an honorary member of our House.” He held up his hand to forestall the protests on the tips of the tongues of many of his students. “He is a Gryffindor, but of the Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin. He belongs to our House. You do not need to include him or tell him everything. Or forget what has happened in the past, feigning friendship.” He smiled over to the members of the Quidditch team, “Or go easy on him on the pitch.” That got chuckles, the rivalry on the Quidditch pitch and in academics was the only one encouraged by the Potions Master, all others he ignored as long as the students were subtle enough. And they did know it.

“Just refrain from antagonizing or attacking him.” He gave his students a pointed look. “Lord Slytherin will not tolerate attacks aimed to harm his son and heir, and can cause serious problems for any daring such a move.” His reference to the wording the Dark Lord had used when he warned his Death Eaters to warn their children against harming his heir, did what it was meant to do: it reminded those children who had parents who followed the Dark Lord, who the man was and what he was capable of doing, and willing to do.

Seeing that his warning had been understood – at least by most of the students – Severus started with his normal lecture about the unity the Slytherins had to demonstrate outside of the common room and his expectations regarding homework and behaviour in class.

When he finally exited the common room, he left behind a group of young magicals assessing the situation anew. The room was abuzz with speculations before the door had properly closed. Severus smiled, he was reasonably sure that there was no problem to come from this direction for quite some time.

Hopefully the Gryffindors would not pose much of a problem either.

ooOoo

Harry walked with Neville up to the tower, while Hermione and Ron took care of the new Gryffindors. Trying to distract his friend from the building tension – Harry had a much-too-active imagination supplying several scenarios of what could and would go wrong – Neville chatted brightly about several new plants he had acquired and was planning to get next summer.

With glee – as he finally was able to remember the password – Neville said “Mimbulus Mimbletonia”, giving the portrait of the fat Lady the answer to her question after the password. Both boys clambered through the portrait hole, only to stop two steps into the common room.
Harry barely registered the comfortable circular room with its warm colours, the mismatched slightly rigidly tables, the sagging couches and armchairs, his eyes were focusing on the boys in Gryffindor robes standing in front of the stairs leading up to the dorm rooms.

The sixth-year McLaggen stood there, arms crossed over his chest, a dark scowl aimed at Harry, flanked by a seventh-year – Towler or something – and a boy Harry had seen but could not name. Others were gathering around them, the tension in the air almost thick enough to walk on.

As the portrait closed after the last first-year had stepped through, Hermione walked right into the middle between her friend and the aggressive-looking trio blocking the stairs.

“Now, look here. There is no reason for this. Move out of the way.” The bushy-haired newly-minted prefect tried to sound confident, authority in her voice. But she failed miserably. She was much too nervous to conceal it. And McLaggen spoke over her attempt to mitigate the confrontation before it could start.

“Potter,” Cormac McLaggen spat, his face gaining a red tint with anger, “You dare come back to Gryffindor Tower after being adopted by Slytherin!” Looking around for approval and finding it in a few faces – much to Harry’s hidden dismay – the big boy got more confident with each word he spoke. “I’ve read you went to many parties over the summer. Father told me he saw you at more than one. Like a good little heir trailing after Slytherin.” He sneered the name and clearly meant it as an insult. “I would have run, refused to eat, had I been you. But you obviously are too much a coward for that. Are you not!” The bigger teenager exclaimed, gesturing in anger.

Harry was standing silently, eyes boring into him, more than one face getting angry, riled up by their loud ringleader. A few cries from the audience, unidentified, demanded Harry answer the claims, defend himself.

“Well! Speak up! Coward! Snake! Why should we allow you to remain one of us?”

Standing straight, confident and with all the poise he had learned over the summer under the tutelage of Lady Narcissa Malfoy, Harry raised his eyes to meet the enraged stare of McLaggen with his own cold green gaze.

“I was not asked if I was happy with being adopted. And the Sorting Hat declared me a Gryffindor. Who are you to doubt it?” With great effort Harry managed to keep his voice even and calm, reaching everyone in the suddenly quiet common room. “What am I to you, that you think you can decide how I have to behave? How I have to cope with the abrupt changes in my life?” Green eyes swept the faces trained on Harry, daring them to demand answers, to question him. “It would have been easy, trying to run. Avoiding confrontation. Clinging to stupid prejudice.” Harry stared them down, assessing which of his house-mates would attack him out of hatred for all things Slytherin, which would go with ringleaders like McLaggen, and who was capable of thinking on their own, able to look farther than the colour of a tie. Sadly, it seemed that there were not many of those in Gryffindor at the moment.

“I chose the hard way. Braved the problems, the obstacles. Learned what I could to be able to fulfil my role as Lord Potter once I’m of age. Like I’m sure my father – James Potter! – would have wanted. It's not my fault that I have to rely on Lord Slytherin to learn.” He let the silence stand for a while. “Better ask yourself why the Headmaster never thought it necessary to teach me.” And with this last cutting remark, Harry strode by McLaggen, bumping into the other's shoulder, and up the stairs to his dorm room.

And here he had hoped that he would get a few days to settle back in before the stress would start. With a weekend at the start of term and all. Who was he kidding? He would have to fight an uphill
battle with the whole school from the start. He should have known, the way they had reacted back in second year, or the moment his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire, why had he even hoped for a single moment that this time it would be different?

Hermione huffed, her gaze following her friend as he stormed up the stairs to the boys' dorms. She turned to the common room and the now slightly unsure crowd of students.

“Are you happy now?” she demanded to know. “Just because the whole of wizarding Britain thinks that they have a right to know everything about Harry, you think so too? Let me be clear: There are rules here at Hogwarts, and if any of you violate Harry’s privacy, I will make sure that you receive the punishment due.” With that Hermione went after Harry to make sure he was well and to reassure her friend that she would have his back. It was good that she was a prefect, it would be easier to keep the worst bullying in check when she was able to enforce the rules.

Up in the fifth-year boys' dorm Harry was unpacking his trunk, placing a few books next to his bed, as he liked to read in them before he went to sleep.

He had just finished sorting his schoolbooks and clothes – getting out his favourite pyjamas – when his dorm-mates, the twins, and Hermione made their way into the room. Suddenly it was full in the dorm and the floor space between the five beds was packed.

Sitting down on Harry’s bed and the worn crimson comforter, Fred – or George, Harry had never managed to tell the two of them apart – grabbed the top book from the small stack Harry had made just next to his bed.

The twin whistled, nodding approvingly. “Bill told us about this book. But it's hard to come by. Mum would never allow one of us to read it.” The red-head held up the book – Harry’s copy of ‘Useful Charms for the Young Bachelor’ – and the other boys came rushing over. All of them had heard of the book, but in the prudish society of magical Britain it was not one that was sold freely.

“Where did you get this?” Seamus wanted to know from Harry, as he peered over the twins' shoulders, eagerly scanning the pages with the educational pictures regarding human anatomy.

“My guardian wanted to make sure I had reliable sources for certain topics,” Harry answered, not sure if he should be embarrassed or proud to be the owner of this obviously sought-after book. It not only contained charms and other spells – as Marvolo had made it sound, probably well aware of the other topics covered in it – but some pictures and texts explaining different forms of interaction between different numbers of witches and wizards, all stuff Harry would think was only to come by in those shops permitting entry only to people old enough. It was captivating reading material.

“Well, he certainly is no prude then,” the other twin stated, starting to sort through the other books Harry had stacked by his bedside. “Do you have any more books like that one?” But before Harry could answer that no, he had only this one book, the seventh-year Weasley held up another book,
confusion in his blue eyes. “What is that? It’s only squiggly lines.”

Harry sighed and held out his hand, demanding the book back. “That one is written in parselscript. And it’s the only copy.” He carefully accepted it back, holding it close to his chest, and looked at his trunk, wondering if it might be a better idea to place the book there under wards and protections. He could not really risk it getting damaged, whether by accident or design did not matter in this case.

“Any guardian giving this to you, Harry, can’t be all that bad,” stated the twins. “If you need help with some of the idiots like McLaggen, just tell us, and we'll make sure they rethink their actions.”

Nodding vigorously, the other twin added, “His father is big in the Ministry, you would think that Cormac knows the rules an heir has to follow. Don't worry. He likes to make himself important.”

With sound claps to Harry’s shoulders and back, the older Weasleys left the dorm, making their way up to their own room. Hermione squeezed Harry in a hug, whispering in his ear that she would help the best she was able, before she vanished down the stairs, leaving the fifth-year boys alone.

“May I borrow the book, Harry?” Dean asked and settled into his bed, drawing the curtains, after Harry had agreed with a nod.

Not many more words were exchanged that night. They all were tired after the long train journey, and Harry was glad to curl up under his blankets, the curtains drawn closed and a sound-muffling charm applied to them. Some of the others were rather heavy snorers, and he was sure not to find any sleep if he left the charms off. While he drifted off to sleep, Harry wondered what this year would bring. Voldemort was no longer trying to kill him, had made an unbreakable vow to make it absolutely impossible for him to do so, and his former enemies at school – the Slytherin students and the Potions professor – were now forced to be polite. The normal causes for excitement were gone. Somehow it did not feel reassuring in any way.

Soon the room was quiet, and all the boys were sleeping soundly. They were back at Hogwarts, a new school year about to begin.

oooOo0oo

On the morning of Saturday, the 2nd of September, Marvolo was preparing to meet with Lord Sirius Black at Griffin House. This was to be the meeting at which Black would hand over the list, and they would set up a contract to define the terms of their agreement.

While he sorted through the papers on his desk – he could not risk having anything lying about that would point in the direction of Dark Lord activities, even if he had left all of that at the old Black House Henry had inherited from his grandmother Dorea – Marvolo could not prevent his thoughts from wandering to his son. Henry was now at Hogwarts, starting the new term with a weekend. The boy had strict orders to write a letter each week, at least one letter. And not only to his father, but to his godfather too. It would not do to be lax in his duties.

He just had moved all files pertaining to his efforts to restore some fortune for the Slytherin House to the top drawer on his left, when one of the elves popped in to announce the arrival of Lord Black. “Show him in!”

Marvolo stood behind his desk and nodded in greeting as Black stepped through the door,
following the elf. “Come in, Lord Black, have a seat,” he motioned to one of the chairs sitting in front of his desk. “Would you like something to drink?”

“A coffee would be nice, Lord Slytherin.” Black sat down, tense and cautious.

The elf bowed and popped away, sending in a tray with one cup and a pot of coffee only moments later.

Sitting down himself, tense as well, Marvolo took a sip from his own cup of sweet tea. No need to rush the conversation and appear too eager. He was supposed to be reluctant to remember this time of his life and not happy about the demands Black had made, even if he wanted to appear glad to have an opportunity to redeem himself even a tiny bit.

“It has been a while since I have been here last,” Black observed absent-mindedly, his eyes wandering around the study and finally stopping to rest on the portrait of the late Lord Potter and his wife Dorea.

“You are older now, Sirius, older than the last time I saw you,” the grandfather of Henry said with a smile. “It is good that you are well again.”

Lord Black smiled back at the portrait before he straightened in his seat and got a pack of parchments from his pocket, enlarging it with a spell cast silently.

Seeing the size of the stack of parchments, Marvolo had to swallow. It was bigger than he had anticipated. It was not a comfortable feeling to remember just how much of his own actions had contributed to the current state of magical Britain. The Dark Lord pretending to be a law-abiding citizen extended his hand, forcing it not to tremble, taking the stack and placing it on the desk before him.

“That is the list of people still missing, their names, dates, when and where they were last seen, images… Amelia Bones helped me compile it,” Black explained needlessly, probably more to breach the awkwardness of the situation than to explain the list.

Marvolo took a moment to leaf through the parchments. A few of the faces he felt he had seen before. But to be sure and to provide worthwhile information, he would have to spend some time going through his memories of raids, interrogations, and other instances where people had died. Not something he would do with an audience.

Placing the stack of papers carefully on the side of the desk out of the way, Marvolo turned to Lord Black and started negotiations. “For providing all the information I can recall pertaining to the people in this file,” he placed his hand on the parchment stack, “and trying to retrieve the body of Regulus Arcturus Black, you will grant me permission to search for an object your brother stole from me, in the houses owned by you and your family?”

“I think we should specify what amount of information you are required to provide, Lord Slytherin. And what the conditions are for searching for this object of yours.” The man’s voice was full of venom, and his grey eyes were looking dark. It was only all too clear that the man was unhappy with his involvement in this. But to get what you wanted, sometimes you had to work with your enemy. Something every good heir learned sooner or later. And as Sirius had been heir for quite some time before he had run away, he had been schooled thoroughly.

They started to make notes of what they both wanted to make sure was included and started arguing about the finer details. Marvolo enjoyed the process and the fact that Black obviously knew what he was doing, but at the same time hated the fact that he was using the lessons beaten
into him by his parents. Marvolo mused that Henry probably would have found humour in getting what *he* wanted out of what he had learned from someone he could not stand. Sad for Black that he only found bitterness in the situation.

It was late afternoon when they finally had a first draft they would give to both their solicitors to check and finalize into a binding magical contract. After all, neither trusted the other as far as he could throw him.

Before Black could leave, the elf was back. “Master Marvolo, there is a wizard at the door. He has a letter.”

Marvolo stood, he had been waiting for the man to arrive. “Bring him in.”

Black stood as well, probably thinking it was better to leave when someone else was arriving. But before the man with his new clothes and carefully styled hair – it looked too perfectly unruly for it to be a coincidence – could say his goodbye, another wizard was shown into the room.

Marvolo had to admit that the healer in Russia had done a splendid job. If he had not known that the wizard standing in the door to his study, clutching a letter, was Bartemius Crouch, he never would have guessed. There still was something of a family resemblance, but this was a different man. The scars marring his face, as if he had been exposed to fire, only added to the differences.

“You are Mr. Willson?” Marvolo asked, using the name that had been chosen for Bartemius to live under from now on.

“I am. Lord Slytherin, I want to thank you for offering me this opportunity,” the man rushed to say, flicking nervous glances between the Dark Lord and his guest.

“Opportunity?” Black asked with a wide-eyed stare and incredulousness clear in his voice. “You know this is You-Know-Who?” a hand was waved in a wide gesture towards Marvolo standing near his desk. “Even if he was declared a new person,” Black amended after receiving a hard look from the blue eyes of their host.

The soon-to-be secretary of Lord Slytherin got a bitter look at that declaration. And the bitterness about his situation in life was clear in his words too. “My parents took me and ran in the sixties. They died in a forest fire. I barely survived. And because of the family connections back here in good old England, I was shunned by everyone back on the continent.”

“Family connection?” Marvolo could almost see the gears turning behind Black’s grey eyes. He tried to remember something about a Willson family and why being part of it would cause one to be an outcast. Better to inform him now, he was a good source to have the information leaking, as it would get out anyway.

“His mother was the younger sister of Bartemius Crouch senior. She married a muggle-born wizard. They left as things started to get… heated,” Marvolo explained, briefly searching for the right way to reference his own way to power back in the day. Before he had lost his first body. It seemed that he had chosen the right tone.

The dawning realisation was quickly replaced with confusion on the last Black’s face. “Why would everyone shun you for being related to Bartemius Crouch?”

Raising a disbelieving brow, the young wizard – well seen from Marvolo’s perspective, they both were still quite young – started to ramble on. Marvolo was glad it did not sound too rehearsed. “For an uncle relentlessly hunting dark wizards, one big part of the community wants nothing to do with
me. The other half doesn’t want anything to do with me because of a Death Eater cousin I never even truly knew. And those still remaining hate to get in contact with someone from a family that ‘does not know how to treat family’. So, yes! I’m happy to get a decent job, for decent money.”

Well, that had been a convincing rant. Of course Marvolo had read all this in the file with the thought-out background for Bartemius Willson. Bartemius senior, the one that had made a career in the Ministry by hunting those that held tradition dear and wanted to use magic declared as dark, had had a younger sister. She had married a wizard named Willson, and they had had a son. They were all dead now. Died in a forest fire many years ago. It had been easy to change the records and pretend the son had not died.

And now the story of who the wizard was, and why he was here now and had not been in the past, would be spread by one of the wizards that would be doubted less than almost anyone else. Because of his wrongful imprisonment, not many would doubt him publicly at the moment.

Clearly uncomfortable, Sirius Black turned to Marvolo. “I will get this to my solicitors as fast as possible. Have a nice day.” Henry’s godfather gave a nod and started to turn so he could leave when Marvolo stopped him.

“A moment please.”

Black turned his eyes back to the wizard speaking to him.

“Henry is still required to write to you regularly. Please let me know if he slips in his duty.” That came out much more stilted than he had intended it to, but it was more important that it was said than how it was said.

“All right,” was the last Black said, but Marvolo thought he saw a glint of mischief in the man’s eyes. He was sure Black would not tell on Henry, probably seeing an act like that as a betrayal. And in fact Marvolo thought that Henry would sooner stop writing to him, than stop writing to Black.

Only moments later Bartemius and Marvolo were alone in the study and the wizard with a new identity gracefully went down on one knee, bending his head in submission.

“Rise and take a seat. We will have to discuss what your duties will be.”

They settled into the chairs and started on a discussion, drinking tea and making plans. Marvolo was happy that the changes to give Bartemius a new identity were finished. The healer’s unique method of combining magical and muggle means to alter facial structures and his talent at forgery made this remarkable situation possible.

“You might be able to lay claim to the Crouch fortune. As far as everyone is concerned, you are the last of the family. At least the last one relatively close to Bartemius Crouch senior,” Marvolo remarked near the end of their discussion.

Thoughtfully, Bartemius placed his now empty tea cup back on the table. “I will have to think on that, my Lord.”

“Take all the time you need. One of the elves will show you to the guest room you will occupy for the time being.” They had agreed that this was the best plan of action so Barty would have some time to find a small flat for himself to rent.
With a flourish Xerxes signed the last papers of a rather sizeable stack of them. Or more accurately, two sizeable stacks of papers. One for the Muggle authorities and one for the Ministry of Magic.

He now was the headmaster of a small school, and the manager of a foster home. With the help of a nice witch Marvolo had recommended in the Department for Family Affairs – Amanda Wisby was her name – and a Squib, one of those looking out for magical children stranded in the Muggle world had stumbled over. The Squib – a man – had been working as a social worker in Manchester and had easily spotted the wizards, confronting them over their intentions. It had needed only a little explaining on their part to get him to agree to help get those children into good families in the magical world. He now was the public face for the Muggles so they could take custody of the children. The mid-fifty-year-old man called himself London Smith and refused to reveal his real name. Xerxes assumed that the man was still bitter over being cast aside after it had become clear that he had no access to magic. The old Lord was glad that he could help the Squib get back into the magical world, helping the children as he had set out to do.

Massaging his hand, Xerxes straightened and smiled at the beaming Minister standing at his desk. “Thank you, Cornelius, for smoothing the way for my little project.” He cast a glance sideways to the two neat stacks of paper and parchment respectively. “Now I need to hasten the renovating on the buildings, casting the wards, getting the last teachers, and all the other jobs that certainly will come up, and hopefully all will be ready for October.” A smile of anticipation graced Xerxes’ face. He had not felt this alive for a long time. And oddly enough, that time had been when he had followed Marvolo to change the world they were living in. And now he was setting out to change the world again, but in a totally different direction. Getting children born with magic into their world, not killing those born to Muggles.

“Why October?” the Minister inquired, walking a short way over to an artfully crafted cabinet, getting a bottle of fine fire whiskey and two tumblers to pour them a drink.

“I want the lessons to start in October. Enough time after the Hogwarts’ term starts for parents to accept the reality and send their children without access to magic to my school. And not too far off the schedule other schools in Britain use for the start of a new school year.” With a small nod Xerxes took the drink from the shorter wizard in his pinstripe robes, settling down in a comfortable leather armchair across from the one the Minister of Magic was claiming for himself.

“That’s a strict timetable.” Cornelius took a sip of the amber liquid, reclining in his chair, a look of satisfaction prominent on his face.

Xerxes nodded in agreement. “I have a building – a nice estate in North England, with a big main house and several smaller ones around it – I have teachers for Math, English, and History.” He waved to indicate that there were more people he had already hired. “The Department dealing with occurrences of accidental magic was so kind as to help me compile a list of names, and I already have a few acquaintances of mine contacting those families with children old enough for school in our world. Waiting longer will accomplish little.” And he wanted this school to start. His Lord had made it clear that it was not an option to leave those children living where they were, in less-than-ideal conditions with Muggles, for much longer, and London had told them about several older children living on the streets who had never received letters to attend Hogwarts, but were clearly magical.

Waiting was a luxury they had no time for. And adopting the kids right off the streets as they had
done with Aiden was not a feasible solution either. So Xerxes had orders to hurry along the plans for his school/orphanage combination as much as was possible.

“How are you going to make the school known? Besides talking to families in your circles?” Questions like this one were the times Xerxes was reminded that Cornelius Fudge was not only someone pandering to the rich and influential to stay in his office, but that he had a quite good mind hidden beneath his bowler hats. Because Cornelius knew that the rich families paid tutors to teach their children, and those that would benefit from a school to send their children to, did not have the money to pay fees, nor were they likely to hear about it from the people Xerxes regularly spoke to.

“I had wanted to post an announcement of sorts in the Prophet.” Xerxes gave a long-suffering sigh, that plan had not gone as he had wanted it to go. It had been a long time since he had walked open-eyed into an ambush like this. “Now it will be a big article by Miss Skeeter.”

Cornelius winced in sympathy. The reporter was known for her sharp tongue and tendency to exaggerate stories as much as she was able, pandering to her audience and their need for tragedy and scandal.

“I have her first draft here. If you are interested?” Xerxes asked, reaching into the inner pocket he had stored the parchment in before he had left the house, looking questioningly over to the Minister.

Eager to read the article before all others – and probably use this in some way to emphasise the appearance that he was close to Lord Lestrange – Cornelius took the folded draft and started to read.

Xerxes had not intended to let Rita Skeeter write something about his school. But the moment she had heard him tell the man he had selected about his motivation to found this school, all had been lost.

The sob story the witch had written about his sister was hard to stand, but it would probably help gain public interest from those families with children that had to get inventive to teach their children what they needed. He had made sure that the funds to support children from families who were not rich was mentioned, and hoped that he would have many letters with applications coming in soon.

At least he was sure that the school would have some students. The Dark Lord had ordered his followers with children under the age of eleven to send them to the new school. It was a certainty that those children would still get lessons from private tutors, but as it was a day school, there was no problem with that.

Chuckling, Cornelius extended his hand to give the parchment back to Xerxes. “Well, she certainly knows how to spin a story to get the attention of the gossiping crowd.” The older wizard accepted the draft back and shoved it back into the pocket.

Seeing Cornelius shift in his chair – as if he was nervous – Xerxes gave the Minister a questioning look, and as the man did not react, prodded “What is it, Cornelius? Are there problems coming up you have not told me about till now?”

Why else would the man be nervous? Xerxes certainly had not anticipated the amount of paperwork needed to found a school. But maybe he should have. Work in the Wizengamot always involved mountains of parchment, why should any other endeavour entangled with ministries and bureaucrats be any different? So, a form not filled in correctly, asking the wrong person at the
wrong time for a certain step in the process, or any other easily made error, could pose an unfortunate problem almost any time.

“No! No unexpected problems,” the Minister reassured his visitor. “No, I’m… just curious… how much your friend Lord Slytherin is involved in this project of yours.” Brown eyes avoided meeting with the piercing eyes of Xerxes who smiled a small knowing smile.

“No need to know?” Xerxes shook his head, he should have known that the old codger would not be able to keep his nose to himself.

“Dodge asked, and tried to be subtle about it. So… most likely, yes.” Cornelius answered, relaxing now that it was clear Xerxes would not react unkindly to the question.

“Marvolo is very invested in my project. I’m not sure if you know – only a few ever knew of course – but his mother died shortly after he was born, and his father disowned him, never acknowledging he had a son.” Xerxes smiled sadly, how long it had taken him and the other Slytherins to realize that the shy and aloof boy was not a muggle-born as they had believed he was. “He grew up in an orphanage in London, in the middle of the war. He has strong opinions on what is a suitable environment for a child to grow up in.” And that he had. It never had been this obvious, but the Dark Lord’s determination to get children away from unsafe living conditions was not something to be overlooked now. It already had caused grumbling from some of the Death Eaters. In a way, Xerxes felt it was good his sons, and especially his daughter-in-law, were incarcerated. Hopefully the Dementors would be back in Azkaban soon.

“The war with Grindelwald?” a confused Cornelius asked.

Xerxes sighed. It was sad how little the average wizard knew about the Muggle world. Sure, he had had to research to learn what life had been like in London during the years Marvolo had lived there, but the lack of knowledge could pose a problem for them. “No, the world war that was raging in the Muggle world at that time. I only read about it – Marvolo does not like to speak about his experiences – but from what I learned, the circumstances were bad.” That was the understatement of the century. He never would have thought that muggles could cause that much damage and destruction. “Now he wants to make sure other children do not suffer something similar.” With a reassuring smile Xerxes held out his tumbler to get it refilled. “You can tell Dodge and all others that might still doubt my friend, that Marvolo has only the best for our community in mind.”

After that they shared another drink, and Xerxes walked out of the office to have a look at the estate that would be “Dorcas’ Home and School”. He had thought long and hard over the name. Early on he had known that his sister’s name should be in there somewhere, but the exact name had been hard to decide on. One idea had been “Dorcas’ School for Youngsters”, but as the older Squib children would stay there until they had graduated, it was not suitable as was any name containing “magic” anywhere in the name. And so he had stuck to a simple name and hoped that it would work out.

And after that he had to go buy a birthday gift. And he already had the perfect idea.
Auror Simons watched in dismay as the Dementors were forced to move away from the prison building out to an edge of the island by a shimmering crowd of patroni. He was dismayed at the prospect of being on guard duty for an undefined stretch of time, just because some pussyfoots in the Ministry had decided they could not trust the Dementors to guard the prisoners at the moment.

Bloody idiots.

Dementors had never been trustworthy.

And he, the one auror confined to doing duty in Azkaban just because he had made one error, was standing here in the cold, doomed to pay for their squeamishness.

Maybe he had taken bribes to let off some that had bent the laws a little. But he had hardly been the only one that did so. He sadly had been the one thrown to the wolves when the practices had come to light and had to be swept under the rug again.

If they expected him to put more effort into his guarding, they had another thing coming.

Sighing, the wizard, rounded around the middle from years of sitting around guarding the prison, turned on his heel and walked into the little apartment the guard stayed in. He had a nice book, hot tea with rum, and cinnamon buns waiting for him. There was no reason to stay out in the open or wander the hallways filled with the stench of unwashed humans. They were crazy anyway.

The man conveniently forgot about the one wizard that had fled the prison a few years prior. He had been on holiday during that time and really was not motivated to think on his own or take steps that would require him to work earnestly.

Soon Simons was reading in his chair by the one fire on the whole island, and the other aurors had left on a small dinghy back to the mainland. The moans of the prisoners became fewer and quiet. Something was changing.

ooooOOooo

Over the weekend Harry had managed to hide the fact he still was taking healing potions with his breakfast from everyone. In particular Hermione and Ron. But now on Monday morning he could not get up earlier than anyone else with the ready excuse of wanting to avoid the dark glares of many Gryffindors, as everyone had to be finished with breakfast for classes.

Now he was sitting flanked by a chattering Hermione and a brooding Ron across from the twins, surrounded by the other fifth-years, who were trying to shield him a little. His three usual phials popped into existence right next to the plate he was sitting at. Ignoring the surprised noises and looks joining the glares, Harry downed the potions in rapid succession. He made a face. These nasty-tasting potions were not getting any better over time.
“Harry!” Hermione hissed from his side as Harry started to fill his plate with toast, bacon, and roasted mushrooms.

Sighing, Harry turned his head to look at his friend. “Yes, Hermione?” And that was why he had tried to keep it hidden: her tendency to lecture and demand explanations. He really did not want to talk about it. That Marvolo made him go to the therapist was enough. He did not need to talk with his friends about it too.

Wide-eyed in confusion over his apparent lack of concern, Hermione spluttered. “You just drank three phials of unknown potions from who-knows-where!”

“No quite right, Hermione,” Harry answered in a serious tone, not even trying to smile. He wished everyone would leave him alone. Sometimes even friends could become overbearing. “Those were the potions I have to take every morning. And they were still sealed when I picked them up. So I know what they were and who made them. No need to fret. Okay?”

That left the girl speechless, for all of four seconds.

“You take three different potions every morning?!” Hermione demanded to know, before she flushed in shame, ducked her head, and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, Harry. You are one of my best friends. I worry.” Her look was meaningful and Harry nodded. They both had received a lecture about the possibility of getting poisoned, from Marvolo and Lord Lestrange respectively. They had talked about it more than once and had to concede that it was not something they could just dismiss. Hermione had tried – longer than she herself believed in it – Harry had had a much easier time of accepting it. The fake Moody had forced him into the tournament, he had been almost kidnapped just last month… that someone might try to slip him poison was not so far-fetch an idea.

“No need to worry. Professor Snape brews the potions and Madame Pomfrey knows about them.” Harry started to eat, hoping that this was the end of it. And surprisingly enough, Hermione started to eat too, but Ron could not let it rest.

“He makes you drink disgusting potions, mate?” Ron sounded outraged on behalf of his friend, scrunching his nose up, probably imagining having to take potions himself. “What for?” the redhead wanted to know.

Chewing the bite of toast he had just taken, Harry took his time answering. He was aware of the many ears surrounding them, trying to hear what they were talking about and attached to mouths only too eager to spread what they learned as gossip around the school.

“Not him, Ron. The healer insists that I take them, and his reasoning was… sound.” There was a glint of curiosity in Hermione’s brown eyes, and Ron still looked stubborn and like he wanted to punch someone. His friend had been easy to irritate lately. Harry was sure that Ron had trouble accepting that Harry was now so obviously from a rich family. His clothes, his mannerisms, all changed to befit an heir to a noble House. Ron was prone to jealousy and Harry tried to make the transition as easy on his friend as he could manage.

“Why would a healer insist that you take potions each morning for so long?” Under the heavy coating of anger and disbelief, concern for his friend began shining through.

“What are they, anyway?” Neville wanted to know, passing Lavender the butter-dish.

Seeing that his friends were not about to stop asking question and would continue to do so – and contemplating what the other students would do to the rumours that were sure to be started right after breakfast – Harry resigned himself to answering the questions. Not that he did so with much
“It is a nutritional potion and two slow-acting healing potions. And before you ask,” the black-haired teenager stopped Ron from asking the next, obvious, question. “Aunt Petunia never had a sense of what a growing boy needed in his diet.” That was the honest truth after all – the school nurse of Dudley’s school had needed to make sure Petunia stuck to the diet plan – even if he left out the fact that he had had not only the wrong stuff, but also not enough of it. “And when I came to Hogwarts, most of the damage was already done. The summer holidays only added to the problem. With a little luck, come January I can stop taking them.”

Harry was grateful for the morning post that was carried in by the multitude of owls at exactly this moment. He really wished that his health, or lack thereof, would not be the topic of conversation so often. It had come up before Quidditch games in the past, when both Ron and Hermione as well as all of the Gryffindor team tried to get him to eat more, but whatever the reason, he would prefer they talk about something else.

Hedwig softly touched down next to him, managing to avoid tipping the pitcher of milk over, a roll of parchment attached to her leg. As she last had carried a letter to London to Sirius – assuring his godfather that he had reached the school in one piece – Harry assumed that this was an answering letter from his godfather.

Green eyes fell onto the seal and he started at recognizing the Slytherin crest. He broke the green seal and unfurled the parchment as all around him his classmates opened their own post.

While his gaze swept over parselscript written in dark black ink, Harry tried to not think too much about how he felt. Up until now, letters from Sirius and the occasional note from Hagrid had been the only letters he received while at school. And now here he sat holding a letter from Marvolo Slytherin, Lord of Slytherin and most likely Dark Lord, addressed to Henry.

Henry,

I’m not sure if you did have the time to read the Prophet, but you should know that the Dementors are being withdrawn from the prison for the time of the investigation into the attack on you and the others during your excursion. I do not expect anything good to come of this. It was a close vote. I still need to work on convincing some of those that knew me before that I’m not the same any longer.

Be prepared to hear distressing news.

I have a request, a task you may be able to help me with. I only realised today, when Xerxes told me he had all the paperwork finished for his school, that his heiress’ birthday is fast approaching. And as I’m a good friend of Lord Lestrange, social rules dictate that I send a present to his heiress for her birthday. Here I am at a loss. You know Hermione Granger – heiress Lestrange – better than I do. What would be an acceptable present? And it has to be something I can wrap into paper.

For that matter, do you have a present for her? If not I can help arrange something and send it before the day.

Have a good first week at school and try to stay out of trouble.
It was a rather awkward letter. The whole situation was surreal. Now Marvolo was asking after ideas for a present for Hermione. At the end of the last school year, he would have rather killed her on sight, and now he was contemplating possible birthday gifts. If he was not so sure he was awake, he would think he was dreaming a particularly ludicrous dream.

Before he could open his bag and place the letter inside, it was snapped from his hand. The young heir of Slytherin turned on the bench and looked up to see McLaggen frowning down at the parchment in his hand.

“Give me back my letter,” Harry demanded in a very quiet and controlled voice. He felt anger bubbling and breathed deliberately while he rose from the bench to stand next to the other teenager. Letting his temper getting the better of him now would be stupid.

“And what will you do if I don’t?” McLaggen taunted, crumpling the letter in one hand. Before he could throw it onto the ground, like he clearly planned to do, Professor McGonagall stepped up to them, stack of schedules in one hand, scowl on her face.

“What is going on here? Mr. McLaggen? Mr. … Slytherin?”

“Cormac was curious about the language my letter is written in,” Harry answered, tense, and clearly not happy with the fact the letter had been taken from him, but nonetheless, giving an explanation that would keep teacher intervention to a minimum.

“That is no reason to simply snatch the letter out of another's hand, Mr. McLaggen. Give it back and finish your breakfast, classes are about to start soon,” admonished the deputy Headmistress, handing out their timetables before she moved on down the table, stopping briefly by the other Gryffindors.

Before Harry could say anything more to McLaggen the boy had dropped the letter, and Angelina had come over.

“I’m the new captain this year. And as we need a new keeper, Friday we will hold a tryout. I want the whole team to be there, all clear?” Harry nodded and Angelina gave a nod in return, briskly turning and speaking to the others from the team.

Picking up his letter from the floor, Harry looked at his timetable. And promptly groaned. History, Potions and Defence on a Monday. Ron next to him started to lament that he had Divination too, and Harry was glad that he had switched to Ancient Runes.

“Let’s get going. Or we’ll be late for History,” Hermione said, closing her bag and stalking out of the hall, followed by a bemused Harry and a still grumpy Ron.

ooOoo

Watching the students strolling in for their breakfast, Severus nursed his second cup of strong coffee with two spoonfuls of honey. His Lord’s son seemed well enough as he walked in with his two friends.
The other professors were talking about their lesson plans, the new first-years, their holidays. Severus was silent, bemoaning the fact that he was to teach again, watching what was happening in the hall. He had to shield Lily’s son, his Lord’s heir, the boy he had come to know better over the summer.

Dark eyes widened in surprise as a little owl parted from the bigger flock coming in through the charmed window and came over to him. It hooted impatiently and Severus hurried to set his coffee down and relieve the owl of its burden.

Unfurling the letter Severus started to smile as he recognized the writing.

A week ago Severus had read an article about ingredients to use as an alternative for poison hemlock in antidotes and had written to Sonja to ask her if she had read the article and what she thought about it. His attempt to speak with Pomona had only ended with the Head of Hufflepuff bemoaning the fact that she did not have enough space in the greenhouses to plant all the plants she would like to show the students in her NEWT classes.

This was the answer to his question, and the Potions Master started to read the long and detailed account of her point of view with a small smile in his eyes. It seemed as if he had finally found someone with whom he could discuss many of the topics he was most interested in.

oooOOooo

The first class he was to teach this year was a Slytherin, Gryffindor one. Sometimes Severus wondered if Minerva had fun arranging his lessons in such a way that he never had a nice start or end to his weeks.

The murmuring outside the classroom had reached its peak, and it was time for the lesson to begin. All was prepared, and the Potions Master was curious as to how his snakes would interact with Mr. Slytherin.

With a flick of his wand the door opened, and the students started to walk into the room. Severus stood at the desk, watching the young people walk in. The Gryffindors seemed uneasy, that is, more ill at ease than was normal. The Slytherins seemed calculating, watching the others with caution.

This was going to be an interesting year.

Slytherin and his two sidekicks selected a table at the front of the class and not in the back as they had done in the past. Weasley looked puzzled, and Granger was nodding in approval. It was a better place to brew, directly under Severus' eyes – when he was not walking through the class – and near enough that the boy should have no trouble reading the blackboard.

Time to start the lesson.

“Welcome to your OWL year. Most of you will not return for the next year. But as abysmal as this class has been, I expect all of you to manage at least an A in your exams at the end of the year.” He let his eyes rest on Longbottom and smirked at the gulp the boy managed. It was just too easy to scare the boy.

“Today you will brew the Draught of Peace. It will help calm someone that is near panic, but if not
prepared correctly it can send the drinker into a long sleep, one that some will never wake from.” He was standing in front of the nervous students in his long, billowing brewing robes with the sleeves close to his arms, reducing the risk of accidentally knocking something over. In a way he loved his job. Once the students were separated into those that never would manage to reach his standards and those dedicated enough to work hard, he enjoyed teaching the NEWT classes. But until then he had to work with the likes of Longbottom and Goyle.

He flicked his wand, making the invisible spelled chalk on the board visible again. “Here are the instructions, you know where to find the ingredients. You have one and a half hours. Begin!”

He watched as the students scrambled to prepare their work stations, get the things they needed from the store, and read the instructions. Slytherin started to copy the instructions on a spare piece of parchment. During their tutoring lessons over the summer, the boy had discovered that the format typically used to write down potion instructions did not help him keep track of what step he would have to do next. So he had invented a way to write them down for himself, that helped him in his efforts.

The boy had named the two distinct formats the “practical” and “theoretical” recipes after he had understood that the normal format grouped together the steps that were needed to complete a certain stage.

Severus had been impressed. To understand the reason behind the way potion instructions were written, and then find an alternative to make brewing it easier, needed some serious understanding of the subject. He had underestimated the boy’s talent. Maybe he would decide to continue the class into NEWTs, now that their differences had been sorted, there was no reason why the boy should still fail in Potions.

Once Severus was sure that all had started and collected their ingredients, he started to walk between the benches, looking into the cauldrons and giving caustic comments on the state of some of the attempts. This was by no means an easy potion, and he could see that the normal state of things would continue.

Miss Granger’s attempt was good, but she lacked the inspiration and creativity to deviate from the exact instructions, which were needed to make adjustments on the fly, based on the ever-changing circumstances one brewed in. Changing weather, moon phases, quality and age of the ingredients... all the parameters that needed to be compensated for to attain exceptional results.

Mr. Weasley was flailing about, hopelessly tangled in his errors, his attempt a bright red, far off from all colours that occurred on the way to the desired result.

Mr. Slytherin’s attempt looked promising, even if he was a little behind the others due to his rewriting the instructions. As there was enough time, that would be no problem, and the boy was relaxed enough, not letting himself be discouraged by his seemingly lagging behind his classmates.

Severus inspected the sludge in Longbottom’s cauldron – that one he just had to save for one of the detentions, it would be really hard to clean out – as he heard a frantic “Professor!” from Pot… Slytherin, whirled to face the front of the classroom, his wand in hand, saw the boy ducking under his table, dragging the two sitting at the same bench down to the floor with him, and cast a quick shield charm over the dangerously bubbling potion.

A loud bang resounded through the whole room, startling the others, before a deep resounding silence filled the room.

Severus was seething. Someone had thrown something into the boy's cauldron, there was no other
way for something like that to happen. But he had to play this right. If he suddenly started to just trust the boy to know what he was doing, he could add pressure to the situation in Gryffindor, making it harder on the one he had been tasked to protect.

“Tell me, Mr. Slytherin, do you know what you did wrong to cause this massive disruption of my lesson?” He deliberately chose to speak slowly and with a harsh edge to his words.

“It seems that somehow an alkaline ingredient managed to land in my potion, Professor Snape, reacting with the powdered moonstone, causing the explosion,” the boy answered, still trembling as he rose from his crouch near the ground.

Dark eyes swept the workspace of the three Gryffindor students and noted that only those ingredients that should be there were on the table. Nothing alkaline in sight. “That is correct, Mr. Slytherin,” Severus said with a sneer, “And as I see, there are no ingredients matching that description on your table. Did you see from where it was thrown?”

Gasps sounded all around the room. This was a first, as far as this class was concerned. He never had acknowledged the possibility of someone tampering with the potion of a Gryffindor.

“No, Sir. I just heard the sound of something falling into the potion and saw the reaction starting.” His Lord’s heir was standing ramrod straight by his cauldron, not looking at any of his classmates and therefore unaware of the wide-eyed, open-mouthed stare of his red-headed friend. Severus had to use all his concentration to not quirk a small smile of amusement over this display.

Instead he turned with billowing robes, walked to the front and stopped behind his desk, again whirling to face the class, thundering his instructions. “As it seems we will not learn who the idiot was, trying to kill a fellow student, the whole class will write at least a scroll on the effects alkaline ingredients have when combined with moonstone and why it is best to avoid mixing them, in addition to your,” he had to raise his voice to be louder than the groaning several students emitted when he assigned two essays, “Essay on the uses of powdered moonstone. Dismissed.” Then he turned to Mr. Slytherin, lowering his voice to a more acceptable volume when speaking to a person standing as near as the green-eyed boy was to him. “You can come by on Saturday during the NEWTs brewing time to rework this assignment.”

With a polite nod the child expressed his thanks and hurried to pack up his bag before he left with the rest of the class.

Severus closed the door after Miss Parkinson and let his gaze rest on the vials filled with several failed attempts at brewing. What a start to the new term. With this, he was almost guaranteed the win in the “most gruesome first day” betting pool that was tradition between members of staff.

Sadly, he won rather often.

oooOooo

Frantic whispers were exchanged between some of the Slytherin students on their way from potions to their next class. “Zabini, you dolt! Why did you do that!?” Draco demanded to know, having seen clearly how the other boy had taken up a small object, and had thrown it into the Gryffindor’s cauldron.

The dark-skinned boy frowned in apparent confusion. “I just felt like starting the year with a bang.
Do you mind the cauldron of one of the brash blowing up?”

Draco shook his head, blond hair shifting with the motion. “Have you misplaced your brain? He is a Slytherin now. You can’t just do something like that.”

Seeing that the other teenager was not moved, Draco just walked a bit faster to get away from the only son of the “Black Widow” as the other’s mother was called behind closed doors.

“Just make sure to mess with the potions of other Gryffindors, and do something less drastic. I don't want to die in an accident in our potions classroom.” Daphne was really irritated with Zabini. And with good cause. If the professor ever learned who had caused the explosion, all hell would break loose.

“Yeah, and don't earn all of us another essay again,” was Vincent’s complaint before they stopped speaking of this incident.

ooOooOoo

“Whoa mate! What was that? First you drag us into the bloody first row, directly under Snape’s big, crooked nose, and then you blow up your cauldron!” Ron was almost shouting on their way from the dungeons up to the Great Hall for lunch.

“Would you please lower your voice, Ron?” Harry whispered frantically. “I can’t see enough from the back, and he insists that I get good grades in all my subjects.” Green eyes looked hard as he stressed the word to convey the importance of his grades.

Ron snorted. “I noticed, mate!” The red-head rolled his eyes, clearly thinking about the weekend spent in the library. Harry had been studying for runes, Hermione had been reading in a book about procedures in the Wizengamot, and Ron had worked frantically on his summer homework.

They talked about Quidditch during lunch, earning themselves a few annoyed and amused looks from Hermione. After that Ron went to Divination and Harry and Hermione went to the common room and started on the history of Magic essay.

“What are you doing, Harry?” Hermione asked suspiciously as Harry cast a copy charm and duplicated his essay.

“Making a copy of my essay to send to Remus, of course. Ma… my guardian insists that he checks all my work. He said that Binns was a horrible teacher when he was a student here, and in a way has hired Remus to teach me History even during the year.”

Chocolate brown eyes began to glow. “Do you think he could…”

“Give you lessons too?” Harry asked her a knowing smile on his face, a flush on hers.

In order not to be late for Defence, they left the common room early, dodging a few Gryffindors giving them dark looks as they walked past.

They met with Ron in the corridor leading to Umbridge’s classroom and had to grin at their
grumbling friend. He was not amused over the amount of homework they already had to do.

When they entered the Defence classroom, they saw the new professor already sitting at the desk. She was wearing a fluffy pink cardigan, and a big black bow was sitting on her head. Harry had to suppress his sudden urge to laugh. Umbridge looked almost too ridiculous to be true.

Quickly all students settled into the benches and got the books and their wands out.

After they all had found a places, the professor stood and addressed the class. “Good morning class!”

Scattered, her greeting was returned.

“No, that will not do. You can do better than that!” Her imperious gaze roamed over the students before her, and Harry refrained from shaking his head. Why did she have to treat them like small children?

“Good morning, students.”

“Good morning, Professor Umbridge,” they chorused back. It was afternoon already, but who cared. It was ridiculous either way.

Harry paid only the bare minimum of attention to the lecture. He copied the class goals and started to read the assigned chapter. He briefly wondered if there were enough chapters to cover all classes this year. But he was resolute in his decision not to get in trouble this year. The malicious gazes the woman threw in his direction did not go by unnoticed. So he'd better try keeping his head down and his nose in his book.

Harry readied a piece of parchment and started to write. He wanted to write an answer to Marvolo’s letter and, as this lesson was a waste of time, this seemed to be a good idea. All around him the others started to read. The lack of enthusiasm was almost tangible.

“What are you doing there, Mr. Potter?” Umbridge asked from next to Harry’s shoulder.

At the last moment the green-eyed teenager stopped himself from turning around. He was to be addressed as Mr. Slytherin while in school, so he would not react to any other form of address.

“Boy! I’m speaking to you! What are you doing?” Harry could hear the patience of the teacher getting thin.

“I’m taking notes, Professor,” Harry answered in an even and polite tone, his eyes locked on the text. As he was writing in parselscript – he still needed to practice, but it was legible – no one at the school could dispute his claim.

With a mighty huff the pink-clad professor stalked away from Harry’s place and through the rest of the room. Harry could see her need to assign detention, to punish someone, radiate from her in all directions. Almost the whole, deadly boring class, the pupils managed to evade her ire until Dean lost his fight against sleep and his head fell with a thumping sound onto the tabletop.

“Mr. Thomas! Detention with me for Friday! Seven PM. Do not be late!”

On their way out of the classroom Ron, Hermione, and Harry exchanged glances. If this was how Defence would be taught this year, they had to find a way to learn on their own. They all had heard
from the Twins and Percy that practicals were part of all OWL exams. And Umbridge claimed that it would be perfectly fine to try casting the spells they should learn this year during the exam itself. But they would not talk about such things where anyone could listen in and so they hurried back to the common room.

oooOOooo

At the end of the first day of classes, Severus took the trek from the dungeons up to the Headmaster’s office. Since he had started as the Head of Slytherin, he had had to report to the Headmaster on the students from his house. In a way it felt as if he was betraying their confidence – and there were things he did not tell the Headmaster and would never do – but it was part of their arrangement and designed to keep the children out of the service of the Dark Lord.

The Potions Master stepped into the circular office and sat down in the chair reserved for visitors. Albus was standing behind his desk looking out over the grounds. The phoenix was preening on its perch and ignored the wizards sharing the space with it.

“Now that he is back, what is changed in Slytherin House, Severus, my boy?”

“Not much,” was Severus’ laconic response. What was it he could say? The Headmaster expected recruiting and traumatized children, and both were just not happening. All violent activities, the few that there had been, took place in the house the Dark Lord had found for exactly that purpose, and with a more political approach it was not necessary to go after children to fill the ranks of the Death Eaters.

Maybe he should try to get these facts into the Headmaster’s stubborn head. “As I have told you, Headmaster, the Dark Lord seems to be taking the more political route this time around. And children are firmly kept away from everything that could be termed violent.” Severus watched as the old wizard started to walk up and down behind his desk. “He only made sure all of his followers having children at Hogwarts at the moment have warned their children to leave Mr. Potter alone.” The old meddler could make of this what he wanted.

Spotting a glimpse of the blackened, shrivelled hand, Severus stood and took his wand in hand. “Let me check on the curse, Headmaster. No need to take any risks on that front.”

With a wary sigh Dumbledore followed Severus’ lead and sat down in his own ornate chair. “Tom’s actions do confuse me, my boy. You are sure you can’t tell me more?”

As he had done most of the time since the Headmaster had sent him to resume his duties as a spy, Severus shook his head. There was nothing more he could tell the Headmaster. “At the moment I only have one project. And there I’m in the testing stages. And as I’m only the Potions Master, he does not discuss the other plans with me.”

There was a lull in their conversation while Severus was performing the diagnostics and detection spells. Halfway through the number of spells he wanted to cast, Severus dared to ask what had been weighing on his mind for a while. “Why do you wait to accept the help offered to lift the curse? I can only delay its progress. In the end it will kill you.” He sounded clinical, hiding his conflicting emotions behind his Occlumency shields.

“There is still some doubt over Tom’s intentions. And I would think you have bought me enough
time that I do not need to hasten a decision.” A bushy white brow was raised questioningly, and Severus nodded in affirmation. There was no need to rush, but he did not see the need to wait either.

He would have to report to his Lord that Albus was as enigmatic as ever.

“Minerva and I will be going to a dinner party in London this weekend. I wanted to ask if you will take the responsibility for the school for the evening?”

Dark eyes met blue ones and Severus nodded. “This is rather short notice. Were you invited today?” In the normal course of things, an absence was coordinated much earlier.

“No! The invitation arrived weeks ago. No, today I learned that Horace will be there too.” The mad twinkle intensified and Severus returned to his place in the visitor's chair. So he already had two things he needed to report and one question to ask. Maybe he should take a free evening today.

oooOOooo

Returning from his pensieve, Marvolo sat down behind the desk in his study at headquarters and arranged his parchments. He had been pacing through Griffin House most of the day until he had finally caved and gone over to work on the information he needed to give to Lord Black. Better not to let these things lie around Griffin House.

He felt miserable. Watching himself, insane, torturing others without rhyme or reason, looking decidedly less than human. It was not really a pleasant experience.

And while he had watched the last set of memories, he came to the conclusion that he needed a method to cover up the involvement of all those of his followers who never had been suspected. And maybe he should ask them what they had been able to deflect and which accusations they were made responsible for. Or he could just state when the people had died, and not who had done the deed. That would probably be the best.

A while later Marvolo again was walking restlessly through the room as Nagini slithered in through the open door, watching her master for a while.

.:I miss him too. It is so empty without the young one near:. 

Red eyes watched as the big snake searched for a warm spot near the fire, coiling around herself into a neat pile. .:You think this feeling is missing Henry? It could be. But why should we miss him?:.

Before wizard and familiar could get deeper into this topic, Marvolo felt the wards tingle, announcing the arrival of Severus Snape. A few quick swishes from his wand, and his current work started sorting itself away. He sat in his chair and sent a pulse of magic to the Potions Master so the man would find him more quickly.

A short knock on the door was followed by Severus stepping through and kneeling.

“Rise, Severus. I guess you are here to give a report on the happenings in Hogwarts?”

The man did as instructed, taking a seat in one of the visitor chairs. “That is correct, my Lord.”
Severus was clad in his teaching robes and looked tired. Being a Professor was a hard profession, maybe it was good that he himself had never gotten the opportunity to teach, as his patience always had been rather thin.

“How is the school?”

Severus started on a detailed account of the popular opinion on Madame Umbridge and the problem of the exploding cauldron in the first fifth-year Slytherin-Gryffindor potions lesson. His suspicion that there was unrest in Gryffindor House directed against Henry – not unexpected considering the past years and what Marvolo had learned about the school’s reaction to the various happenings – and the dissent he suspected in Slytherin.

“Did you see who it was?” Marvolo wanted to know, feeling a little nostalgic. It had been an often-used prank to ruin the potion of one of the others. Slughorn never had been one to pay enough attention to curb such shenanigans.

“No, my Lord. I was looking in the other direction. But as your son has improved tremendously in potions, I do not fear that one of the attempts to ruin his work will harm him. He will work on reworking the assignment on the weekend.”

“If you think I need to reinforce my orders, tell me who does need a reminder.”

Severus accepted the wordlessly offered glass of lemonade and poorly masked the cold shiver running down his back at the casual reference to the Dark Lord’s practice of reinforcing his orders. The potions master nodded in confirmation and accepted the glass floating over to him. Marvolo hoped his warning would be taken seriously, he did not want to have to think about a way to reinforce his orders to the children themselves. He had a feeling he would not enjoy the need to punish children. A look to the cabinet he had hidden the pensieve in reminded him of the memories he had been wading through. No, he would not enjoy torturing children. It was odd, but that was the new reality.

“The Headmaster and McGonagall will be at a dinner party in London on Saturday. The old man informed me today that I will be responsible for the school on that evening. I think he wants to meet with Horace Slughorn at that party. I do not know why, but the Headmaster still doubts your offer to lift the curse, my Lord.”

Red eyes looked into the distance, contemplating. “So he has found my old Head of House. Do you think you can get more information about the party?”

“I can try.” Severus took a sip from the lemonade and set the glass down. “My other assignments are progressing well.”

“Assignments?” a confused Dark Lord interjected. “Beside protecting Henry, spying on the Order, and the two-fathers-potion, what are you working on?”

Severus blushed and looked down at his hands, and Marvolo realized what other assignment he had given his people. “You have found a partner, and you want to ask for approval?”

A head covered in black hair nodded and dark eyes stayed trained on folded, long fingers. “I have met a woman whom I can see myself living with.”

Marvolo blinked a few times. He had not thought that Severus Snape would be among the first fulfilling his orders to start a family. Remembering the stack of letters from several witches interested in meeting Lord Slytherin to explore the possibility of marriage, Marvolo winced and
took a sip from his own lemonade.

“Do I know her?” He had trouble imagining Severus with any woman – he still remembered clearly the desperation in the man’s voice as he had begged for the life of Lily Potter – but it seemed he had found a woman.

“Probably not,” was his spy’s response. “She is a Squib. Sonja Jiggers, she works at the apothecary belonging to her father.”

So that was the reason he wanted to ask for approval. A Squib. Well, it was a change in policies, but as he wanted to reduce the number of magicals born in the muggle world, keeping Squibs in their world was the deciding factor.

“Considering your own parentage, I do not see any reason against the union between you and Miss Jiggers.” Marvolo smirked at the red-faced Potions Master. As long as the Prince and Jiggers families were not related… “Please check that you are not related to her on your mother’s side. And while you are at it, check if you were disowned or not.” There still was an empty seat for the Prince family in the Wizengamot, as far as he knew, there was no other remaining family. And if the late Mrs. Snape and her son had been disowned, they needed to search for Squib lines of the family.

“What is it you are concerned about, my Lord?” As usual the spy’s face was impassive, and knowing the strength of the man’s Occlumency shields, he didn’t really have a chance to learn what the man was feeling or thinking by force. He would have to ask.

“The pattern, with magic seemingly appearing out of nowhere after several generations, and Squibs being born in families that are magicals for several generations… I think introducing Muggles into the line prevents Squibs. I think that too-close family relations are one of the reasons for Squibs. You are a half-blood, so your children with a Squib not related to you should be fine. But…” He was unsure, it all was conjecture at the moment. Why Squibs were born, what happened that magic returned after several generations... they did not know the reasons.

“It is unsure if our children will be able to wield magic,” guessed the Potions Professor and Marvolo nodded, that was exactly the problem they were facing at the moment.

The spark of an idea bloomed in the depths of dark eyes. Smiling to himself – he had not only made idiotic decisions in that time – Marvolo gave the other a questioning glance. “What if we had a way to test two prospective parents if their children are likely to be magical?”

“Do we have a way, Severus?”

“Not yet. No.”

Marvolo chuckled. “Add the costs to your bill. And let me know if I can get you some text or other things to help in your research.”

Severus emptied his lemonade, bowed, and took his leave.

oooOOooo

After that first day the situation started to escalate as far as Harry was concerned. Monday evening
he came into his dorm, and all his things had been charmed green.

That was annoying, but easy enough to reverse.

The next morning found Hermione ripping an advertisement of the twins from the board by the door, while Harry dodged a few colour-changing spells in order not to be green by the time he reached the Great Hall.

There he sat down on the bench at the Gryffindor table, throwing the crown someone had placed on his seat over to the twins and snatching the parchment from the table that Hermione’s had placed there while his friends continued to squabble.

“Why do we have to meddle with the twins, Hermione?”

“Because we are prefects, Ron!”

With a grin on his face, Harry had to give it to the twins. They knew how to get attention. The advert read:

_Bunches of Galleons! Your allowance can’t keep up with your spending? Want to get some money? Talk to Fred and George Weasley, Gryffindor common room, for a simple, almost painless part-time job._

He had a feeling that he would not have much to laugh about for the next time. And his prediction came true during the first week of term.

A crown, most of the time something simply transfigured, appeared on his chair or seat in all of his classes. One evening there was itching powder in his bed. The few encounters with Slytherin students, nodding in his direction, were tame in comparison.

Ron was getting angry at those that were needling Harry with taunts and pranks, and Hermione tried to keep them from retaliating.

When Harry walked into the fourth-year runes lesson he would share with the students from Slytherin and Ravenclaw, he immediately spotted Luna and walked over to sit by her.

“Hi, Luna. How are you?”

“Fine. Thank you! And how are you?” she looked dreamily up from her summer homework and smiled at the older teenager standing by her side. “Do you know who is trying to crown you? They are making the same error over and over, they can’t just leave the crown for you to find.”

Harry laughed. “I do not think they want to crown me, Luna.”

“Why do they leave crowns lying about then?”

In a way, school was the same as ever – essays to write, lessons to go to – but on the other hand it felt different to have a parent interested in his grades. The animosity of the other students wasn't really anything new. Harry sighed and concentrated on the lesson. Professor Babbling had allowed him to start her class two years late – he should better prove that he was interested in learning what she had to teach.
The smell of cooked eggs filled the dingy kitchen as a group of five wizards sat around the dirty table in the middle of the room. They had bottles of cheap beer standing in the middle and casually chatted, bent over a map of the North Sea.

“You think we can do that?” one solidly built wizard said, sceptically waving his bottle in direction of the map.

“I can’t leave my brother there. Just because that tramp of a wife of his needed a reminder of her place and that Ministry bitch....” a red-faced, mid-forties man slurred a little unclearly around the edges. He glanced around the room with blurry eyes and got nods from his friends. They all knew that this was maybe the only chance they would get to free some of their friends from Azkaban.

“We have a week before they're comfortable in their new routine. Jeff, you have a boat?”

Jeff saluted with his empty beer bottle and the planning started in earnest. That the Dementors were no longer guarding the prison had made the news all over the island in every pub and meeting place for those not always following the laws. The talk had mostly revolved around this temporary change in the prison.

They wanted to get their family members out, as long as they only had to row over there and get them into the boat.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Prank

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the first complete week back at school, Harry walked slowly down from the dorm to the common room on Saturday morning. He had slept late after he had spent the previous evening lifting charms from his bed before he could get any sleep.

He was a little curious that all the others – even Ron – had gotten up before him, and that included Dean, who had not been back from detention when he had closed his curtains. Maybe Ron and Hermione were waiting for him in the common room. They had gone down for breakfast together throughout the week.

What he found in the common room was a surprise. All the students from fifth through seventh years sat around the fireplace surrounding a pale-looking Dean, who nodded to a lecturing Hermione. They all looked rather grim.

“You should go talk to McGonagall, Dean! I’m fairly certain that this form of punishment is not allowed!” Harry’s brows raised into his hair, Hermione sounded as if she was ready to start another crusade. He was reminded of the way she had talked about the elves last year, or her rants over the “trial” for Buckbeak in third year.

“I don’t know, Hermione. My mum and Dad can’t do a thing, they are Muggles, after all. And I don't want to cause any trouble. I heard Umbridge works for the Minister.”

“Even if!” one of the other students exclaimed. Harry had trouble spotting who it was in the group sitting so close together. “With the curse on the position, he obviously wants to get rid of her!”

The discussion dissolved into speculation over the alleged curse on the position of Defence Professor as Harry walked around the group to find a seat next to his friends and Dean who held his hand as if he were in pain.

Hermione huffed, and her complaint was heard clearly in a lull in the ongoing discussion. “She's a horrible teacher! We all know that there's a practical part to all our OWL exams!” Those that had taken the OWLs last year and the year before nodded in confirmation, some murmuring words of assent. “We'll never be ready with her for a teacher!” the bushy-haired witch huffed again and quoted in her patented voice, “Understanding the principles of defensive magic. Recognizing situations when defensive magic can be lawfully employed… It's laughable!”

“And the way she insists on treating us like we're small children,” Lavender complained and added in a mocking voice, acting like a prim little student “Good morning Professor Umbridge.”

Angelina nodded fervently. “I had hoped that I would get lucky and have a better teacher for my NEWT year. Or even a better book!”

This complaint found agreement from all others. Just considering that all years, from first up through seventh, had the same textbook for the class, felt like a joke.

“If we could use the time for self-study, it would only be half as bad,” Hermione said. They all had learned that the professor would not tolerate other books or notes on the desks during her lessons. The number of points she had taken from all the houses for offences like that was unusual high for just one week.
“Yeah,” Dean said glumly, “I wouldn’t recommend getting detention from her. The quill she made me use to write lines is a vicious thing.”

Harry frowned. “What do you mean, Dean?” But the other boy did not answer, waving the question aside and leaving rather quickly, and Hermione was quarrelling with Ron, who asked her how she could quote this horrible book easily. “I have read it, Ron!”

Harry saw the way Fred and George were looking at each other. The two always appeared to be able to communicate without words, and it looked like they were coming to a decision then and there.

“Hey, everyone. May we ask for a moment of your precious time?!” one of the twins said with a bow adorned with many flourishes, while the other stepped up onto one of the more stable tables, getting some small colourful boxes out of his pockets. “We want to offer all students wanting to use the defence class time to study something worthwhile a discount on our *Skiving Snackboxes*! Eat one half and become ill, so you can leave the lesson, then eat the other half and you can use the time as you wish!”

Money started to wander from the different students to the Weasley twins and Harry watched as Hermione stalked off with an annoyed huff. If he had not been absolutely certain that it would spell disaster should he try to skive off classes, Harry would have been tempted to buy some of the candies. But he decided he had better not risk it.

Together with Ron, the young heir of Slytherin walked out of the Gryffindor common room to catch up to their friend on the way to the Great Hall. Maybe in his next required letter to Marvolo he could ask if there was anything true about the rumour talking of a curse on the position of Defence against the Dark Arts Professor. It was likely he knew something, Harry had the impression the man tended to research the most obscure topics.

On his way from the potions laboratory, where he had monitored the NEWT students during their independent brewing time, back to the Slytherin common room, where he wanted to speak with his fifth-years, Severus recollected Mr. Slytherin’s performance. As he had hoped when he offered the time for the boy to make up the ruined potion, this second attempt came out acceptable.

But now he had to make sure that his students knew of the dangers of attacking Henry Slytherin. On Monday, one of them had sabotaged the potion in a way that had caused a dangerous explosion. If one of them really was so reckless as to antagonise the Dark Lord… or maybe it had been one of those that had no ties to the Dark Lord? There weren't many matching this description in fifth year. Only one of the boys but three of the girls...That might be an explanation for the total disregard of the danger, however sane the man seemed to be at the moment. Severus had not forgotten the torture Karkaroff had had to endure, and as far as the Potions Master knew, the man was still alive and suffering.

How could he make it clear that it was dangerous to attack Mr. Slytherin without compromising the Dark Lord’s official image? That was a difficult balance to find.

Severus was sure that Lord Nott had warned his son Theodore at the beginning of summer, before the Dark Lord had taken up residence at their house. And he suspected that Draco had seen
something during the summer that had driven home the point that it was never a good idea to make an enemy of the one named the darkest wizard of recent times.

He stepped through the hidden door leading from his quarters directly into the Slytherin common room. He did not know if the other Heads of House had their quarters connected to the dorms as well, but he thought it really convenient.

When he entered the room a few older students vanished to their dorms – he had to hide his smirk, seeing the young couples vanish for a little more privacy – and the few working on their homework looked up, only to go back to their work a moment later.

The fifth-years were sitting together looking sullen, waiting for him as he had expected. He had sent them a note to be here now, and they obviously would not dare defy their Head of House. And now to find a way to make them understand.

“Do you know why I am here?” He spoke quietly and with a dangerous drawl, causing Messrs Crabbe and Goyle to pale considerably.

In that moment, Severus knew that his students had seen who had caused the explosion, and it had been one of them. He had suspected that it had been one of the Slytherins and not a Gryffindor. But now he knew. That would make getting them to toe the line easier. Hopefully.

“I see you do.” He let his dark eyes travel over the young magicals with a knowing smirk, watching like a hawk for their reaction. Pretending to know more than he did worked surprisingly well on teenagers. There! A small flinch, covert gazes, and nervous fidgeting. Well, there he had the information he had needed.

“Mr. Zabini, it is unwise to antagonize the Slytherin family. Consider the two wizards constituting the family our House here at Hogwarts is named after. Both are known for magic that no one had seen before. Both are influential in our world.” He made a pause for dramatic effect. “And if I see you blowing up another cauldron in my classroom, you will spend the rest of term in detention dissecting potion ingredients. Understood?” The young Mr. Zabini nodded and Severus turned, without acknowledging this, to the sons of his fellow Death Eaters. “Mr. Nott, Mr. Malfoy, please make sure your friends understand the risks of attacking the son of Lord Slytherin.” He made a tiny pause before he spoke the name Slytherin and the widening of Draco’s eyes – so similar to his father’s – showed him that his message had been understood.

With a curt nod to his students, Severus left the common room. He had marking to complete. Summer essays. Sadly, they did not get better over time, as each year he got new first-years and had to start with them from the beginning. The scotch he had gotten out of the betting pool might make the ordeal more bearable.

ooOoo

After the stern talk and warning from their Head of House, the fifth-year boys had made a bee-line to their dorm, leaving the girls behind.

Zabini looked oddly pale under his dark skin tone, and the faces of the other four were serious. Draco looked over to Theo and tried to ask without words if he wanted to explain the dangers, or if Draco should try to put it into words. His only answer was a helpless shrug, and with a sigh he sat
down on his comfortable bed and the silken comforter.

“Well, I guess hoping he wouldn't figure it out was fruitless from the beginning,” Theo said, letting himself fall onto his own bed.

“What is he trying to tell us?” Zabini asked, frustrated, rubbing his eyes and sitting down himself.

Goyle and Crabbe sat down together on one bed, getting out a pack of Exploding Snap cards. It was obvious that they wanted to leave the explaining to Theo and Draco.

“What is he trying to tell you,” Draco said as a statement, raging his hand through his hair, mussing it, because it was not a question. All of them knew that Lord Slytherin still was the Dark Lord, their fathers had told them. Blaise was the only one of them whose parents – well, only his mother, as his father was long dead – had not pledged themselves to the Dark Lord’s cause. Therefore he was the only one of the fifth-year boys unaware of the warning.

Zabini looked around and into the faces of his four dorm-mates. “So you all know?”

Crabbe and Goyle ignored the question, Theo nodded and got his wand out of his robe-pocket, fiddling with it. Draco sighed again, because he was obviously the one elected to explain this particular mess to Zabini. “Yes, we know.”

He gave the other teenager a calculating look and got up from his bed to start pacing. That explanation he would not be able to make while sitting down.

“You know what name Lord Slytherin had before he adopted Potter and claimed his seat on the Wizengamot?”

Zabini looked confused, his brow in furrows, but he nodded slowly. “He-Who-Most-Not-Be-Named. But he was under the influence of some curse? At least mother told me that was what was written in the papers.” His confusion only intensified, judging by the look on the other’s face.

“Exactly. But…” Draco hesitated, now to decide how much to tell, and what to leave unsaid. “He did not discard the network he had built. Some of the old goals – like preserving traditions – are still being pursued.” He waited a moment, trying to see if Zabini was following, before he continued. “Those hoping that, without the insanity caused by this curse, he will be the great leader he seemed to be,” Draco felt faint by this point in time, hopefully none of this was going to get back to the Dark Lord, “were warned that an heir is essential in the plans, and therefore any attacks on Henry are forbidden.”

“You call him by his name?!?” exclaimed Zabini, jumping up from his bed, looking incredulous.

Theo rolled his eyes behind the dark-skinned boy’s back, and Draco could just barely stop himself from doing the same. Really? That was what Zabini picked up from this? Sometimes he wondered why the son of the Black Widow had been sorted into Slytherin.

“Father encouraged me to cultivate a friendship with him. We had dancing lessons together over the summer. Of course we came to calling each other by our names.” Draco sounded incredulous over his classmate's inability to grasp the important points.

“He is a nice enough bloke,” Theo chimed in. “Fearless,” he chuckled. “You should have heard the jokes he made over Lord… Slytherin while they were staying with father and me over the summer. Had to start from the beginning with learning everything.” Theo shook his head and flopped down on his bed.
“He is named Slytherin now. I think the best thing is to more or less ignore him for the moment,”
Draco said, pinning Zabini down with a hard stare. “Or do you want to risk antagonizing Lord
Slytherin?”

“What can he do?” Zabini asked, looking and sounding arrogant.

“Really?” Theo asked sitting up again, holding his wand in both hands, “You ask what he can do to
ruin your family? He is *Slytherin*! You know there is poison? Rumours? Slander? You can make a
powerful friend, or a powerful enemy here. I think an ally is always preferable.”

And with these last words from Theo the conversation died. Crabbe and Goyle continued their
game of cards, and the other three started on their various homework.

It was a big pile of homework, there was no doubt this was their OWL year. Draco sighed,
hopefully Zabini would refrain from more stunts like the explosion on Monday. But somehow
Draco did not believe it would be that easy.

oooOOooo

After he had made up his ruined potions work from Monday – receiving a nod of approval from
Snape, that made him feel a little smug – Harry walked up to the hospital wing. At breakfast
Hedwig had brought him a note from Madame Pomfrey, informing him that he had an appointment
with his mind healer this afternoon. He had known that Marvolo had made arrangements for him to
continue to have sessions with her. And in a way, he thought they were helping him cope with the
joke that he had to call his life. But on the other hand it was another thing that made him different
from all the others, and he so wished just once to be like the other teenagers. He sighed, turning the
last corner before he reached the corridor with the doors to Madame Pomfrey’s domain and took
the last steps.

“Ah, Mr. P… Slytherin, just in time for your appointment,” the medi-witch greeted him briskly,
just as the doors closed behind him. A smiling Professor Flitwick walked past them and left the
hospital wing. He probably had fetched the squib psychotherapist and brought her here.

Harry followed the witch clad in the white and lime-green robes and clothes of the healers over to
a door leading from the main part of the hospital wing into a private room.

“This is the room I have prepared for your use during the mind healing sessions. Please inform me
before you leave.” And without waiting for a reply from the boy, she turned and walked back into
her office.

Harry shrugged and walked through the door to find Mrs. Goyle sitting in a nice chair, sipping on a
cup of tea, surrounded by the usual arts equipment she had for him when words failed him and he
resorted to expressing his feelings through art.

“Hello, Mrs. Goyle,” Harry greeted his mind healer, giving her a small bow like a student or child
had to give a Master of any profession. Learning proper manners over summer had left its traces.
“Thank you for taking the time out of your day to come here for my sessions.”

She waved his thanks away with a friendly smile.

“Don't be ridiculous, Henry. You are my patient, and I feel obligated to keep on helping you. That
this encompasses coming to see Hogwarts during term...” Her smile transformed into a grin, “That only gives me the opportunity to see the school for myself. It was quite the blow once I learned that I would not be coming here as a student.”

Not really able to imagine how that must have felt, Harry walked to the place obviously intended for him and sat down. He had thought he would not have anything to tell, but now he felt that there were several things he needed to speak with someone about. And as his friends were part of the problems he needed to speak about, he was glad that Mrs. Goyle was here to listen.

“Classes have been in session for a week now?” Harry nodded in confirmation, biting on his lip, remembering the dark looks and taunts from the other students. “Can you tell me something nice that surprised you, and then something you were angry or upset about?”

“I got a letter from Marvolo during breakfast on Monday. I never had a letter from family before, only from Sirius. That was nice, if confusing,” he answered her usual first question quietly. She always wanted to know something that he had liked and something that had made him angry. It had let him realize how many small things there were that made him happy.

“Why were you confused?”

They fell in their usual routine, and Harry quickly realized that he actually was glad that Marvolo had insisted they ask the school to make these sessions possible. Having someone standing outside of all the problems to talk to would make it easier to keep his cool. And so Harry started to tell her about the dark looks he was getting, the pranks, and his conflicting thoughts. In a way, he understood that the others had trouble accepting that he was okay with living with Lord Slytherin, considering their past. But at the same time, he could not understand why they all seemed not to see his need for family, his right to be happy for once.

Mrs. Goyle only listened and made suggestions as to how he could handle the pranks and dark looks, and how he could spot the moment he had to include the teachers in the situation. While he might not want to get others in trouble for their pranks, and not want break the code of honour not to snitch, he should not allow them to put him at real risk of serious injury.

An hour later Harry left, feeling better after unburdening some of his niggling doubts onto the shoulders of another, walking back to the common room. He had promised to meet his friends there, as they had homework to finish and spells to practice.

**oooOOooo**

He had been surprised to receive an invitation to a dinner party from the Holyhead Harpies. But after Witch Weekly had asked for an interview and he had given it, everything seemed possible.

Now Marvolo had just apparated to a street near the house the party would be hosted in and checked a last time that his robes – linen and silk in different shades of blue and green, complementing his glamoured eyes – lay correctly, before he started to walk up the path to the Manor of the owner of the all-female Quidditch team.

Others arrived after him, some were already walking up the path a few paces in front of him. He could hear laughter and chattering from those around him. Marvolo sighed. One evening socialising with the stars and starlets of Quidditch in Britain. He needed social contacts, and could
not only consort with the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, or even only those working for the Ministry. So this was an opportunity... even if it felt like a kind of torture.

It took almost no time to reach the door where the guests were being greeted by the manager and the players. Smiling winningly, Marvolo bowed to the athletic women playing for the team and went into the house.

“Lord Slytherin!” A brown-haired woman in a nice rose over-robe covering a cream-coloured dress, came over, smiling and extending her hands. “Nice to meet you. I’m Gwenog Jones, beater and captain of the team. May I introduce you to the others?”

“Please, if you would be so kind?” Marvolo smiled again, while inside he sighed. This looked to be an evening he would spend being chased by women.

While he followed the beater and captain around the room, smiling at the different guests, taking in their names, Marvolo spotted his old Head of House – that Slughorn was still alive and looking not too old, although he had gained some weight since he had last seen him, surprised Marvolo a little – avoiding the current Headmaster of Hogwarts by vanishing into a group of happily chatting dinner guests.

For a moment he catalogued what knowledge his Potions Professor and Head of House had about him. But, all-in-all, there was nothing of significance the man could know. He knew that he had researched horcruxes in his youth. But as Dumbledore already knew of them – he had to employ Occlumency to remain calm and composed at that thought – he had little to gain from interrogating the former Head of Slytherin.

It was rather amusing to watch the subtle hunt the two wizards were conducting with the other guests providing an obstacle course, though.

They all settled at a large table for dinner, Marvolo seated between Miss Jones and the wife of the team’s owner.

“How is life treating you, Lord Slytherin?” Miss Jones asked him, looking up through her lashes, and smiling sweetly. Oh no, she was flirting with him.

Smiling back and sipping on his excellent wine, Marvolo sighed inwardly. He was not certain if he knew what it felt like to be attracted to someone. He had started creating horcruxes at a time of his development when teenagers normally started to realize that there were other things one might do together with others. So he knew how to recognize when someone was interested in him, or when others were interested in each other. He had learned to flirt, as it was an excellent manipulation technique. But he himself no longer had any feelings, and therefore never learned what he might like in what mostly was called romantic relationships. He even had read a copy of the book he had given to his son in the hope of learning of some symptoms to identify if he was interested in someone.

So far he had not felt any of the symptoms described in the book. Maybe Miss Jones was not the type of woman interesting for him. Or maybe women in general were not right for him. He wasn't in any hurry to find a partner. Even if society almost demanded young Lords to marry a witch.

“Well, at the moment I am mostly occupied with getting my life back into a semblance of order.” He aimed for a self-mocking smile that invited the others to either pity him or join in on the mocking. Better to have the joke on him and be seen as friendly, than them having reason to mistrust him.
From across the table he heard Slughorn sigh and turned to watch his old Head of House shaking his head sadly. “You always had so much potential. I always wondered what went wrong to lead you down such a dark path in life.”

Sure that the old self-serving collector of influential people was trying to maneuver himself to be in the most advantageous position he could find for himself, Marvolo smiled and decided to use this to further enforce the image of the unfortunate victim of an ancient curse.

“Oh, you might remember that I wanted to teach,” Marvolo told the old teacher smiling, “But Headmaster Dippet was of the opinion that I should try and get a little real world experience before he would consider hiring me as a teacher.” A quick glance around the table made him aware that most guests were listening in on their conversation, as he had expected. “And on the travels I started after this, I came across the curse that made me extremely paranoid and resurrected some childhood problems.” He smiled a cold smile and fixed his old teacher with his cobalt-blue-glamoured eyes. The fact that Slughorn had ignored him until well into second year still rankled, as absurd as this was.

“Experimenting with magic better left alone, abandoning all reason, and spending over a decade as a bodiless spirit gave me tons of experience.” He shook his head sadly, earning the pitying and slightly confused looks he had expected. “But now I will have to spend some time removing the legacy still remaining.”

He deliberately turned to face Dumbledore, bringing forth a confused expression. “I still do not understand why you refuse my offer to lift the curse you tripped,” he indicated the blackened hand just visible under the long colourful sleeve of the Headmaster’s robe. “You are aware that it is deadly, and will only gain strength over time?”

“I am aware, Tom.” Marvolo refrained from rolling his eyes at the fact that the old goat still insisted on calling him by this name. “But you have to understand that I can’t trust you to cast magic at me, without some safety measures.” The smile on the wrinkled face was condescending, and Marvolo just had to smile back unbelievingly.

“You are aware that no sane wizard would agree to the vows you want me to swear? The wording you chose is so restrictive that I could not even say it was raining though I was drenched, as long as you claimed the sun was shining. I’m not sure, though, what your objection to my alternative was. You never said, Headmaster.”

The Headmaster had no response to that and continued his conversation with his dinner partner, ignoring Marvolo.

The Dark Lord asked the witnesses of this exchange with raised brows, if they were as confused by the man as he, and was slightly surprised that they indeed seemed to agree with him.

“Do you plan to marry?” Slughorn suddenly shifted the conversation away from potentially dangerous grounds over to a potentially embarrassing topic.

“Yes!” one of the witches chimed in, eagerly leaning forward in her chair, smiling almost predatorily. “A female presence in the life of young Harry certainly would benefit the boy!”

Nodding slowly, Marvolo smiled charmingly – he had been right, this was torture! – “Probably. But as I’m still adjusting to having a body again, and Henry and I are still learning how to live as a family, I do not know if it is wise to add another member to our family so soon.”

The rest of the evening Marvolo watched Slughorn evading the Headmaster, and himself dodged
several attempts from witches to get him alone and flirt with him. Not one of them was remotely appealing. He needed to meet more different women to ascertain if he was attracted to them.

Or maybe he still had not enough soul back to have such reactions at all?

As he was not sure he even wanted to feel sexually attracted to anyone, Marvolo decided that pursuing this kind of interaction had no priority at the moment.

He was hounded by young – and not so young – single witches the whole evening, and when he had to dodge an actual attempt to kiss him, he decided to call it a night and to leave as soon as was polite. He had been right: it had been mostly torture.

oooOOooo

After a Sunday filled with completing homework – it was insane how much they got to do just in the first week! – catching up with Runes, and what his friends had done during the summer, Harry was now on the way to breakfast.

He had been more or less successful in avoiding McLaggen and his cohorts, but he still could not shake the feelings of dark looks following him everywhere. It was unnerving. Hopefully they would be too engrossed in school work soon to keep up this level of animosity for long.

He snorted and shook his head at Hermione when she looked over questioningly. As if it was likely that he would be that lucky.

He settled next to a happily chattering Hermione and across from an eagerly-filling-his-plate Ron, to get his bowl full of porridge and drink his two phials of potion.

McLaggen and his friends came into the Hall shoving each other, laughing and joking around. They came dangerously close to Harry and the others sitting on the bench already eating their breakfast, and almost toppled over some of the pitchers of juice.

McLaggen sat himself heavily onto the bench next to Harry, turning his back on the green-eyed young wizard, joking with his friends. One of the other boys got out several small cream pastries and threw them over to a few first years. Before Hermione had a chance to warn the young Gryffindors, they had bitten into the pastries and turned into a few enormous canaries, which were the cause of a big burst of laughter at the Gryffindor table and among the students at those of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. The Slytherins were sitting too far away to see what was happening, although a few of them were standing up craning their necks.

Harry just rolled his eyes. He had Defence with Umbridge first thing after lunch and was not really interested in the boisterous escapades of his fellow Gryffindors. For once he would like a quiet breakfast. So he turned back to his bowl and continued eating his no-longer-warm porridge with cherries. A sip from his goblet of juice brought a grimace to his face. Somehow the taste was off.

Hedwig's arrival distracted him as he took the letter addressed to him in Marvolo’s neat writing, a small smile on his face. Even if it was Monday morning, the food not tasting quite right, the others making too much of a racket, he to have his favourite subject with his most hated teacher – and wasn’t that an achievement, to replace Snape in that spot in only one week – but a letter from his adopted father brightened the day.
It was really confusing, but he was starting to realize that he might not need to fight it.

Henry,

Thank you for the information that Miss Granger has read “Hogwarts: A History” several times. That is a good starting point to acquire a book for her birthday. Do you think she would be interested in a copy of one of the Founder’s chronicles?

I will get the set of quills and ink that you have described. There should be no problem to get the presents to Hogwarts in time.

On Saturday I went to a dinner party with the Holyhead Harpies. The Headmaster was there, as was my old Potions Professor. It was an entertaining evening.

If you should read some rumours about me and some witches in the papers, rest assure that they are exactly that: rumours. Disturbingly, some of the players of the Quidditch team tried to flirt with me at that party, and I was even asked if I was looking for a wife to – and I quote – “add a female presence to your son’s life”.

It was not easy getting out of that pinch without resorting to cursing them senseless. Some things really were easier before I decided to go the legal route.

If you need to deflect questions, you can say that I’m too involved in righting past wrongs, removing dangerous things left behind, and managing both our estates. If someone makes problems, or you hear of any other rumours, write me and I can give you advice, or speak with the offending person.

I hope you have a better week than last and wait for your letter

Marvolo

The letter was still as awkward as the first one, and stilted. But that the man made the effort to write was something Harry really liked. With a marginally better mood Harry followed Hermione and Ron – who had had much fun mocking Umbridge over the weekend – up to the history classroom.

ooOoo

The morning and lunch passed without incident. But Harry had no real appetite to eat much. The gazes he got because he passed on the treacle tart and only took another piece of bread were odd, especially because McLaggen was giving him looks too. But as he had to explain himself to Hermione, he quickly forgot about that.
A little later the three of them met again in front of the offensively decorated defence classroom.

They all had learned in the last week that Professor Umbridge insisted on her students behaving as if they were in elementary school, and that she did not tolerate any deviation from her expectations. So they stood from their places as the teacher strode in – again in shades of pink from head to toe – greeted her with a chorused “good Morning Professor Umbridge,” and waited for her to tell them to sit down.

Harry really had to fight his urge to roll his eyes. That woman was a disgrace for all teachers everywhere.

“Class, before you start to read the chapter for today and write notes that I will collect at the end of the lesson, let me state a new rule.” Judging by the predatory look she threw in Harry’s direction, the messy-haired teen got the feeling she would do something to counter his actions of last week.

“All notes taken in this classroom are to be made in English as it is spoken today. No French, no Latin, nor any other language you may come up with. Am I clear? Everyone violating this rule will have to face a considerable loss of house points and at least one week of detentions.”

A weary and thoroughly unenthusiastic “Yes, Professor Umbridge,” was her answer, and they all settled down to do as they were told.

It seemed that she finally had caught on to the fact that no one had been really doing the reading she wanted them to do. The book was just so demeaning in the way it was written. Harry felt like he wanted to vomit each time he only had to see the book. He was fifteen, not five!

And with this stupid new rule, he could not spend the lesson with writing his letters to Marvolo. That she wanted to collect the notes they made at the end of the lesson was another problem. Sighing to himself, Harry got out his quill, ink, and a piece of parchment. Now on to train his patience with idiots. Maybe the exercises Professor Snape had made him practice for Occlumency could help with staying calm.

For the next bit of time only the turning of pages and the sound of quills scratching over parchment was to be heard. Harry had trouble keeping himself from throwing the ridiculous book across the room and out of the window. Did the Board of Governors know about this? Even if one would claim that there were no dangerous wizards around – like common criminals willing to rob others for their money – there were dangerous beings around – like boggarts, for instance – that one should know how to defend against. But this curriculum would not allow them to learn any of that.

After several agonizing pages into the chapter about why counter-curses were, in reality, only curses named differently to make those using them feel better about it, Harry started to feel the need to use the facilities. His stomach was making worrying noises, and he felt really not well. Of course Umbridge did not normally allow students to leave the classroom for a rest room break. For that matter, most of the other professors were of the opinion that their students were old enough to manage those necessities better, going during breaks between lessons. But an emergency was an emergency.

Harry raised his hand, because speaking out of turn was a sure way of getting detention with the pink toad. Sadly, the witch had made it a sport to ignore students raising their hands to ask a question after the first week when almost everyone had questioned her approach to teaching defence.

As the minutes ticked by, Harry started to squirm in his chair, cold sweat breaking out on his brow, the noises his stomach was making were getting louder and his need to go becoming pressing.
Hermione was throwing him glances, clearly worried about his behaviour.

Harry was growing desperate, and started waving his hand around, contemplating if he would risk the embarrassment of losing control in front of all these people, or just leave the classroom without permission. As Umbridge pointedly turned her back to him and Hermione next to him, her hand in the air as well, Harry thought 'screw her' and got out of his chair, hastening to the door out into the corridor and to the nearest rest room.

He just managed to get into a stall and get his trousers down in time not to soil his clothes. While his bowels emptied with much noise and not entirely painlessly, Harry wondered what had brought on this… problem. The last time he had experienced something similar had been when a stomach bug had made its way through the elementary school he and Dudley had attended. And then there had also been vomiting. And that was thankfully missing here. He remembered – grimacing at the sensation in his stomach, bending over trying to calm his breathing – one time that Dudley had had too much sweet juice and summer fruits with ice cream, sending him to the loo for quite some time as he suffered through a bout of diarrhoea.

Moaning, Harry resigned himself to sitting here until his insides decided to calm down again.

ooOoo

Hermione watched as Harry finally got up from his chair, abandoned his things and ran for it. She hoped that he would make it in time, guessing that he really needed the loo, even when she did not know why he needed to go so urgently. Then she turned to look at Umbridge who was fuming and shouting after Harry, demanding he stop and come back. The bushy-haired witch was pretty sure her friend had heard nothing of what the toad had said.

The rest of the lesson finished at a snail's crawl. She handed in her notes and collected not only her things but Harry’s as well. As he had not returned, Hermione had to assume that he either had gone to the hospital wing or was still in one of the nearby rest rooms.

“Come, help me search,” she said to Ron, and smiled as Neville followed them as well, taking Harry’s bag from her.

The three of them went to the nearest rest room first, as that was the most likely place for Harry to have run to. And the moment they came to the door and the boys stepped in, they knew they had been right.

They could hear soft moans of pain and the sound of someone having a bad case of diarrhoea. “Harry, is that you?” Ron called into the room, and stepped in when a faint “Yeah,” was the only answer.

Hermione felt herself go pale. Harry had run from the room over half an hour ago. If he had sat on the loo for all this time and still was not better, he needed medical help. Turning to Neville a bit distraught, she told him, “Stay here and have a look out for Harry. I'll get Madame Pomfrey.”

Neville, pale and with big eyes himself, nodded and took Hermione’s bag from her, enabling her to run faster. And run she did.

Her feet in her sensible shoes making clear sounds on the stone floors, she ran as if a life was depending on it. Because she truly believed that well might be the case.
Severus was on his way down from the Headmaster’s office, where he had had a look at the curse in the old man's hand, back to the potions classroom. He sighed, still wondering why the Headmaster was hesitating this long before accepting the Dark Lord’s offer of help.

As he turned to go down the stairs he was almost barreled over by a student running into him. He was about to give some scalding comments and take points from whatever House the student belonged to when he recognized Miss Granger, Xerxes’ heiress.

The relief in her face as she looked up to him made him stop in his tracks. “So glad I found you, Professor,” the girl panted, trying hard to get her breath back. “Can you inform Madame Pomfrey that she is needed in the boy’s loo near the Defence classroom? I fear Harry might have been poisoned.”

Without conscious thought he had his wand in his hand and had cast a patronus to get the information to Poppy as fast as possible. Then his dark eyes focused on the girl in front of him.

“Show me the way.”

And they were running. Severus knew that Lord Lestrange and the Dark Lord had told their respective heirs about the dangers of assassination through poison, and this girl would recognize the symptoms. So if she thought there was even the slightest possibility that his Lord’s son, Lily’s child, had been poisoned, then he had better run.

A few minutes later they came to the corridor where the Longbottom boy was hindering another student from entering the rest room he was standing in the door of. As the young Ravenclaw saw the Potions Master coming down the corridor, he wisely decided that he could use one of the other rest rooms just as well.

The boy held the door for them and Severus identified the stall containing the boy he had made an oath to protect because a red-head was standing at it, speaking to a person behind the door.

“Miss Granger, please tell me why you suspect poison was involved. Open the door, Mr. Weasley.” Severus got out his wand and the small pouch with emergency potions he always carried around with him and stepped into the small space in front of the loo, occupied by a pale, sweating boy.

He cast several potion-detection charms and spells, checking the pulse of the boy, while Miss Granger rattled down her observations.

“In the middle of class, Harry started to squirm in his chair, like he really needed the loo. He was sweating and his stomach made funny sounds. He tried to get Professor Umbridge’s attention, but as she insisted on ignoring him, and he got paler. Then he ran from the room. We found him here half an hour later, he still was sitting here.”

That did indeed sound quite serious. By now the boy was a bit dehydrated and was losing still more water. Severus got out a general antidote and held the phial out to the child, who took it with a doubtful look.

“I’m not sure I will be able to keep it down, sir.” He sounded a little exhausted.
“Just try, Mr. Slytherin.” He watched the green-eyed teenager take the potion and waited to see if it brought on any changes.

When Poppy finally arrived, he backed out of the stall and made sure the matron had room to work. At least it sounded like the contents of the boy’s stomach were now all out but, judging by the grimace on the young man’s face, he had still cramps.

While he waited, he sent another patronus to inform the Dark Lord that his son was currently in need of medical attention and there was suspicion that someone had slipped him some kind of potion. He had thought a moment whether he should include the word poison in his message, and in the end decided against it. It would be better not to rile the Dark Lord up too much.

“We need to get the boy up to the infirmary. Once there, I will perform a few tests to see what was given to him to induce this reaction. Severus, I will need your help for that.” She sounded stern as always, and Severus found himself nodding to her demand for help. “Go to your lessons, or back to your common room,” the medi-witch said to the other three Gryffindors, “Your friend is in good hands now. If any of you start feeling off, come up to the hospital wing immediately.”

The girl and the two boys nodded and, looking back at their friend, reluctantly made their way to their common room.

Severus helped Poppy put the heir of the Dark Lord in a set of pyjamas and onto a stretcher to levitate him up to the hospital wing. On their way there they came across many students as one class had just ended and the children were making their way from their classrooms to the next class, a place to study or their common rooms.

Mr. Slytherin clearly was mortified, but had no energy even to try to hide behind his blanket. And so they started many a rumour in the school until they reached the infirmary to start on identifying what had caused the diarrhoea.

Severus sent another Patronus to Minerva, and one to the Headmaster, making sure all relevant parties had been informed. After that he started a cauldron to brew one of the potions used to identify others once they had been ingested. What he had planned for the rest of the day just had to be made sometime else.

ooOoo

Once dinner had passed, Harry lay in his bed in the hospital, sipping on a goblet of clear water in the hopes that he would be able to keep it in. The first try with some simple broth, after it seemed the cramps had passed, had sadly ended with his sitting on the loo for another round only minutes later.

Finally Professor Snape had identified the ingredients that had been in the potion someone had slipped him during breakfast. After that, it had not taken long to identify the potion that had been used.

Madam Pomfrey had been shaking her head. “That is a potion to help with costiveness, but it should only be used by the drop! Seeing your reaction, you probably had a gulp of it.”

“My juice did taste funny this morning,” was all Harry had to say to that, and now he was stuck here pondering what had happened and what it was likely meaning. Someone had slipped him a
potion knowing full well that it would cause him serious discomfort, maybe even harm. And as it had to have happened during breakfast – something about the time it would take for a reaction to occur with his other potions – only Gryffindors were the likely suspects. Remembering that McLaggen had sat next to him, and that it had been him and his friends causing the first-years to turn into canaries… well, he had no proof, but he just knew it had been them.

Before he could work himself into a really dark mood, he heard the doors to the infirmary open and several people come in.

“Thank you, Professor McGonagall, for escorting me here, but I hardly think it is necessary. I have been a student here and am quite capable of finding the way up here to see my son.”

A smile spread over Harry’s face and he was a little surprised at how happy he was that Marvolo had come to visit him in the hospital wing. Never before had family come to visit him. Well… maybe that was not true, Sirius had visited him after the third task, but that had not really felt like a visit just to see how he was doing.

With a last few steps Marvolo came around the privacy screen Madam Pomfrey had placed around his bed, and the worry Harry could see in the glamoured eyes warmed his heart. Whatever the motives to adopt him might have been, it seemed the man had come to care about him at least a little bit.

Harry barely registered his Head of House leaving as Marvolo walked over and sat on the edge of his bed.

:How are you feeling, Henry? Are you feeling better? Severus informed me that someone gave you a potion in much too high a dosage, effectively poisoning you?:. Harry was not sure, but there was a hint of something in the hissed inquiry. And it felt good to have an adult sitting on his bed, hand placed on his knee, eyes watching him intently. It felt good to know there was someone who truly cared.

:I’m feeling better, sir. Madame Pomfrey said tomorrow the effect should be gone and I will be able to go back to classes:. It felt not quite right to call Marvolo sir still, but changing the form of address was not something he was quite comfortable with yet. He fiddled with the blanket spread over him, a little unsure of himself.

Marvolo accepted this with a nod and asked the next question :Do you know who did it?:.

Harry hesitated. This was the Dark Lord, what would the man do to someone that had harmed someone whom he had claimed as family? And he might have suspicions, but he had no proof.

:I do not know. But it has to have been a Gryffindor, no one from the other houses was near our table during breakfast, as far as I have seen:. He fiddled with the blanket and did not dare look up, his Occlumency was not nearly good enough to lie to Marvolo.

:So you have no proof, but you suspect you know anyway, don’t you?:.

The man was just so damn perceptive. Harry nodded, dejected.

He looked up as he heard a sigh from the man next to him. His surprised look was met with a sad little smile. :If you do not want to tell me, I will respect that. But if they continue to play such dangerous and cruel pranks… you have to tell someone:. It had not taken long for Marvolo to pick up that this had not been the first prank played on Harry. He just was really bad at keeping his
face calm.

.:How bad is it?:. Marvolo’s hissing sounded cold.

.:All the others so far have been pretty harmless. Changed colours on my things, a crown popping up around me… This one was the worst:. 

.:So far. And all have been from Gryffindors?:. Marvolo wanted to know. And Harry was glad that the man did not press for more embarrassing details.

Harry nodded, saying nothing, obviously it was impossible for him to have one normal year at school.

.:Shall I try to find a way to somehow get you away from all those pranks? Maybe your own room, or something like this?:. the wizard next to him asked.

Madame Pomfrey came in, bringing another bowl of broth for Harry, shuddering at their speaking parseltongue and leaving again. It was a nice way to talk about sensitive things without being overheard. A language only the two of them understood.

Did he want to get away from the bullying? Then that was what it was. Not mere pranks for fun. No, they were aiming all their pranks at him, to get him to break. But for the first time, Harry felt like he had someone able to do something about it, and willing to act. No one had tried to counter the articles Skeeter had written last year. The Dursleys never had done anything to prevent Dudley from bullying him. No teacher had said anything against the badges the Slytherins had made last year. But this was different.

.:If there is a legal way, yes, please:. Harry hissed quietly, almost as if speaking only to himself.

A warm and big hand landed on his shoulder. Dark blue eyes smiled down at him as Marvolo stood. ..Before Madame Pomfrey comes to send me away, I will leave now. I will look for a way to increase your safety in your dorm. Do not let them get to you! And as soon as you have proof, tell a teacher! Will you do that?:.

Harry nodded and then asked something totally unrelated ..Do you know if there is a curse on the defence position?:. He really was curious.

The other laughed ..Why do you want to know?:.

..I really could do without Professor Umbridge. She did ignore me when I wanted to ask for permission to use the facilities. And I’m sure she will give me detention for leaving without permission:. Harry could not help but pout about that. He really hated that woman.

..Well, there might be a curse:. Marvolo had a little smirk on his face as he said that ..I will have a word with the professors. No need to worry about detention:. With a few more pats to his son’s shoulder, Marvolo finally left Harry to his meagre meal and walked with a wave around the privacy screen and from the infirmary.

Harry eyed the broth warily, he was not really sure if he wanted to risk another round on the loo. But he was starting to get hungry. He sighed. Well, there was no other way to see if he was better. He sat up properly and reached for the bowl.
Silently fuming, Marvolo made his way up to the Headmaster's office. In front of the Gargoyle he met with Severus, who gave him a small nod but projected a picture of himself kneeling into his Lord’s mind in the short time their eyes met.

In the office – still filled with many seemingly useless trinkets and all the portraits of past Headmasters and Headmistresses – the Head of Gryffindor and the Headmaster himself were waiting for them.

Before they could start a conversation, a witch in pink robes came into the office, flustered and out of breath. “Headmaster, I want to know where Mr. Potter is. He is late for his detention!”

“What detention?” McGonagall wanted to know, looking like she could not believe what she was hearing. And for once Marvolo did agree with the austere witch.

“For leaving the class without permission, of course!”

Marvolo snorted, ignored the indignant witch, and turned to the Headmaster. “I think you should make sure your professors know how to recognize a medical emergency. And I want to be informed once the culprit has been found.” He was calm, deceptively calm, and knew it would not last. He could not stay long and keep up the mask of law-abiding wizard.

“Now, now, Tom. No need to be quite so dramatic. It only was a prank between students…” Marvolo interrupted the Headmaster, no need to let him ramble on, spouting his useless drivel.

“I know you do not want to believe anything bad about Gryffindors,” Marvolo sneered. “But they are bullying one of their own. If you do not find the culprit and punish them appropriately, it will get out of hand.”

He turned to Minerva McGonagall “You will keep an eye on my son and cancel these ridiculous detentions?”

“Naturally, Lord Slytherin,” she nodded to him, clearly more aware of the implications than the Headmaster.

With a look into dark eyes Marvolo sent Severus the order to look for any information that would help find the culprit, or at least reduce the number of suspects. Or more accurately, he sent him images to convey this order.

A few images of Sherlock Holmes and the tools used by police to secure evidence at a crime scene, and one of Severus using them in the stereotypical Holmes attire would hopefully make his wishes clear enough. This was a useful tool, but a little limited by the need to use only images. Maybe they needed to work out some codes for situations like these. But that would have to wait for another time.

With quick strides Marvolo walked to the edge of Hogwarts' wards, to apparate back to his Headquarters. He needed to vent some of his frustrations, and he had a certain traitor in mind to use as a target.

When he was calmer again, he would get started on that search for a way out of the Gryffindor dorms for his son.
Chapter End Notes

This “prank” was inspired by an idea borrowed from Firazh's Restituo and my foolish overindulgence of summer fruits (I just love strawberries, but to eat more than 1kg in one sitting is not a clever idea!).

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Harry woke to voices speaking quietly somewhere nearby. He opened his eyes to see an unremarkably white ceiling and blinked in the early morning light. Right. He was in the hospital wing – lying on his back – because someone had mixed a potion into his breakfast. If he was lucky, Madame Pomfrey would let him leave for this morning’s breakfast.

“You two can leave again, he’s not up yet.” That was definitely the unhappy voice of Madame Pomfrey.

“We just want to see that our friend is well. You said yesterday that we would be able to visit him this morning.” And that was the logical argument presented by Hermione in her best you-are-the-adult-but-I-know-better voice she sometimes used. Mostly with Mr. Weasley when Muggle inventions were discussed, or with Sirius, as he had noticed during the brief stay at Grimmauld this summer.

“If you plan to release him for breakfast, you would have to wake him now anyway, Madame.” And that was Theo. Harry frowned, he had thought Ron would have come with Hermione, but then he smiled because his two friends from Gryffindor and Slytherin were here. Ron probably had not wanted to chance missing breakfast. The red-head was always hungry.

Harry sat up, pushed the blanket back, and swung his legs to the side and out of the bed. “I’m up!” he called to gain the Matron’s attention.

She walked briskly over to him, a scowl on her face as she spotted him sitting, ready to get up. “Mr. Slytherin, you will remain in bed until I clear you to leave!”

Harry refrained from rolling his eyes. He only knew too well that she tended to keep patients longer if they tried to escape her clutches early.

Luckily for him, the diagnostic spell cast on him showed that he was hydrated once more, and no trace of the potion was left behind. Harry made quick work of getting dressed and met his friends, who were smiling as brightly as Harry himself, on the other side of the privacy screen.

“Hermione, Theo! Thanks for visiting! Come down to breakfast with me?”

Both of his friends nodded, and they turned to leave the infirmary behind. “Have you finished the essay for Ancient Runes yet, Theodore?” Hermione asked the Slytherin as they passed one of the many big portraits concealing one of the many short cuts.

“No, not yet. I want to check another book before I make a final outline.” Before the two of them could get too deep into the discussion – Hermione tended to do that, and Harry had learned that Theo could talk about runes as long as Ron could talk about Quidditch if he let him – Harry interrupted them.

“When did you decide to call each other by your given names?” In truth, he was a little astonished. From at least thinking of Hermione as a Mudblood to exchanging privileges for usage of the given name in barely a few weeks? That was suspiciously fast.

“Uncle Xerxes is friends with Theodore’s father, both of them are acquaintances of your…"
guardian. We are both your friends. I thought it only logical, especially considering that we share several classes as well.” Theo and Harry shared a smirk. Hermione and her logic. Did she decide what undies to wear the same way?

“And as the rules at school are more lax, we exchanged names on the way up to get you out of the Hospital wing!” The smile on Theo’s face quickly vanished. “You should probably invest in a poison detection bracelet or something similar.”

Harry only nodded to that idea and changed the topic. He would rather speak about ancient runes than the unpleasant day he had had the day before. And so he asked them a question from his own lesson. That he was a year behind them was convenient for getting help.

HooOoOoOo

His peg leg made a loud sound every other step as he walked up to Albus’ office. The evening before, he had received a missive from his friend, asking him to come over for lunch the next day. As usual the topic the Headmaster wanted to discuss was not mentioned even in passing, but that was something he liked about his old friend: His vigilance when it came to communication over unsafe channels.

Alastor walked past a few of the brats called students here – they made his way free rather fast, throwing him speculative glances – and once again contemplated if he would have had a better time teaching them over staying bound and drugged in his trunk. When he was honest, he was not quite sure. Even auror trainees had grated on his nerves pretty fast, kids even younger were bound to annoy him faster. His magical eye followed a pair of Hufflepuff girls giggling and quickly walking around a corner, as he stepped on the stairs leading up to the headmaster’s corridor.

“Licorice!” Alastor barked at the Gargoyle which jumped out of the way, clearing the path to the revolving stairs and up into the circular Headmaster’s office.

“Alastor! You're early, my friend!” Albus exclaimed with a twinkle in his eyes, waving the ex-auror over to one of the squashy armchairs in front of his desk, conjuring a stool in the same colour for Alastor to rest his feet on. “Have a seat!”

Huffing, Alastor sat down and placed his one whole leg up on the stool, the peg-leg sticking out straight forward as it was wont to do. He waved away the offer of a lemon drop and massaged his leg just over the place where it had been cut off so long ago. “Out with it, Albus. Why did you ask me to come over?” Waiting around for answers never had been his strong point. And with all that had happened this summer, he did not think that there was time to be overly careful.

“Tom was here yesterday. I want your opinion on a few things he said.”

“Why was he here at the school?” Alastor asked, leaning forward in his seat.

Albus waved his hand, indicating it was not that important even as he answered. “Harry was in the infirmary. Tom came to visit the boy.”

And that was a trait of Albus he did not like: His tendency to assume to know something and disregard all other possibilities. He did not do it often, but when he did, Alastor only seldom agreed. “And why was Potter in the infirmary?” By now he was snarling. It felt like he had to pull all the information out of Albus’ long nose.
“Someone had slipped him a potion as a prank.” Another hand wave, and an indulgent smile. “He reacted rather violently to it and needed to be brought to the infirmary to be monitored.”

“There's more to this,” Alastor stated rather coolly. “Tell me all of it.”

And that Albus did, recounting what he knew of the events of the day before, and what Riddle had said in the evening.

“Well, Riddle is right in that you will lose the boy completely if you do nothing against this bullying!” Really, on this eye Albus seemed to be blind. James had bullied Snape when both had been at school, and Albus had done nothing. It seemed he was repeating this error here. “You really believe this is no more than boys having a little bit of fun?” Alastor’s eyes bore into his older friend's, and then he shook his head a little, flummoxed.

“If it had been a prank, more than one of the students would have been affected. The potion was not put in the jug, but in Potter’s goblet. He was the one targeted. And if I was still an auror, I would have classified this as attempted murder. Without proper medical care he could have died!”

That made the Headmaster hesitate, much to Alastor’s satisfaction. Maybe they could avoid repeating past errors and not create another Dark Lord by letting bullying go unpunished.

Alastor let his magical eye travel to linger on the blackened hand, hidden behind a thin wall of cloth, the cloth of a brightly coloured robe.

“You have another problem, Albus,” he remarked getting his flask out of his pocket to take a healthy swig.

“I have?” Albus asked with twinkling blue eyes, taking another of his candies.

“Why are you still waiting to let Riddle lift this curse? There are rumours all around. Something about you demanding he has to take an oath or a vow, worded in a way no sane wizard would agree to. And about him making an alternative proposal. You're looking like a crackpot, as if you were missing a few of your marbles. What was his idea?” This was truly a puzzle. Was Albus getting old? Was the curse on his hand affecting him? Since the day they had been at that hovel and Albus had put the ring on, Alastor had been wondering why he had done so. Why had Albus put on a ring he knew was cursed? He was worrying. And the number of rumours did not help to defuse his worries.

“Tom proposed that we meet somewhere neutral. Like Gringotts. Said I could bring a curse-breaker of my choice, and he would make an oath not to cast any magic at me that was not intended to help get the curse removed and keep me alive,” Albus sounded dismissive, stroking his beard.

“And you refused?!” spluttered Alastor. That was actually a good proposal. A safe place, reinforcements for Albus, and a reasonable oath. “What do you hope to gain?” He narrowed his eyes in thought.

“Tom wants to build his public image. He needs to help me to get positive reactions from the public. I hope to get some measure of control over him.”

Alastor snorted over this lack of perception of the reality of the situation. “He does not need to help you to gain good standing, Albus. He already is seen as the reasonable one in this. He offered you help. Publicly too. And he's asked others why you refused and what he might do to let him help you. You, Albus, are seen as unreasonable and he as the handsome, nice guy only trying to help. He does not need to help you anymore, Albus. You can’t earn anything from this aside from your
He heard a rumble, and his eye swivelled back into his head, looking out of the back of it, trying to see who was coming up the stairs. He glimpsed black, lank hair and black robes and instantly knew it was Snape.

Before he could demand an explanation from Albus, the man spoke. “I asked Severus to take lunch with us. He knows the situation from a different angle and is the one with the most direct experience with Tom.”

“Direct experience, my ass,” murmured Alastor, but waited until the younger wizard had made his way up.

ooOoo

Severus walked up to the Gargoyle guarding the entrance to the Headmaster’s office. He had received the request to take lunch with the Headmaster in his office today at the breakfast table, and he had a suspicion what they would talk about.

The Potions Master wondered if the Headmaster would take the same approach to the bullying that he had taken back in the day when it had been the Marauders tormenting a Slytherin boy, or if it would be different now because all the teenagers involved seemed to be from the House of Lions.

Stepping into the office, Severus noticed that Alastor Moody was also in attendance and gave a curt nod, keeping his face calm and empty. Even if he was getting a little nervous in the presence of the old retired auror. The man was just too suspicious and prejudiced for Severus’ taste and state of mind.

“Headmaster,” Severus greeted before he took a seat in the unoccupied armchair. “You wanted to speak with me.”

“Yes, Severus, my boy. I wanted your opinion regarding yesterday’s events.” A tap from the Headmaster on the table brought them their lunch and Severus took the napkin and spread it over his lap. Eating in the Headmaster’s office was mostly a messy affair. A desk was not made to eat at.

“Regarding the potion used? Probably a simple constipation remedy, there are several in use based on the same ingredients. Easily ordered by owl from almost all apothecaries. Nothing extraordinary. The way it was administered suggests lack of knowledge over its effects or lack of concern for what it would do. I would wager it was both. That will not help in finding the culprit, as anyone could have ordered the potion.” Relatively sure that was not really what the Headmaster wanted to hear, but playing up his knowledge as the Potions Master and not the spy, Severus started to fill his plate with potatoes and some steamed vegetables – he never took a heavy midday meal – while he waited for the Headmaster or Mad-eye to make a comment or ask further questions.

“While that is interesting information, I was more interested in the likely actions Tom will take in the light of what happened,” the Headmaster admonished, filling his own plate with the food offered. It all smelled rather appetizing.

Chewing the bite he had just taken, Severus nodded in acknowledgement. That sounded more like
what the Headmaster and the old auror would like to know. Taking his time – eating too fast just led to problems with the digestion – Severus thought about what was the best answer here. Yesterday evening the man had acted like many an enraged parent Severus had seen in years previous. Considering that he should not risk exposing the Dark Lord and his plans, it was probably the best to stick to the parental angle of his likely actions.

“If Professor Umbridge insists on antagonizing Mr. Slytherin in class, I’m sure Lord Slytherin will take the case before the board, or even the courts.” Severus took a sip from his goblet of water, he had been lecturing most of the morning, and his voice had suffered for it. “The same if he gets the impression that the staff is not taking appropriate action regarding the obvious bullying targeted at his adopted son.”

His answer seemed not to be what the Headmaster had wanted to hear. But considering his own experiences with this kind of bullying, Severus had much more to say.

“But I think you should be more concerned about the boy’s reactions to the events of the last days, or rather since the start of term. And less so of what the Dark Lord might do.”

That got him a calculating look from Moody – that eye was truly unsettling and came to rest on his left forearm – and a puzzled one from the Headmaster. Refraining from rolling his eyes and continuing before Albus Dumbledore could continue in the same vein he had the day before, Severus spoke in serious tones. “I’m sure you remember what the constant pranking from four Gryffindors in my year did to me. I’m not sure if I would have walked another path in life if I had been spared the constant torment here at school.” He held a hand up to forestall the Headmaster from interrupting as he attempted to do at that choice of words. “But the fact that four other students ganged up on me, humiliating me at every turn, contributed to my decision to give in to the offers made by the Dark Lord.”

Now the Headmaster looked disappointed, like he had said something monumentally stupid. “Severus, my boy. I do not think that Harry will be this easily tempted.”

“He has a penchant for bending, if not outright breaking the rules.”

“In an attempt to help his friends!” Albus argued.

Severus only threw him a pointed look. Was the Headmaster so blind, or did he choose to disregard the effects bullying had on teenagers? He would make a last attempt to let the man see the light – so to speak – before giving up on hoping for help from the man in this. By the day he was more and more secure and happy in his decision to go back to the Dark Lord. Even though the man had killed his best friend.

“This is not the first time Mr. Slytherin is the target of mistrust from the other students. You remember the time with the Chamber of Secrets? When all thought he had entered himself in the Tournament last year? These attacks by his own house might just be the drop letting the cauldron overflow.” He saw a small nod from Moody sitting next to him – the auror was more perceptive to the causes for violent behaviour and bad decisions than the Headmaster – and the sceptical look of Albus Dumbledore. “You may think the boy is more reasonable about this. But if I have learned just one thing from teaching teenagers for over a decade, it is that all of them have one thing in common: They are all ruled by their emotions! And at the moment, Harry Potter, or rather, Henry Slytherin, feels rejected by those that should shield him. Scorned again for something he had no say in. If you do nothing to stop the bullying, he will feel betrayed, Headmaster!”

But it was all for naught. The most passionate speech he had ever made – he seldom chose to speak
this candidly, positioning himself in the middle of attention, only making exceptions for potions – and that bloody twinkle in the blue eyes regarding him spoke of happiness for him relating to the son of James Potter.

“I’m so glad you have found it in you to see past your animosity for the boy’s father. Trust me, I will make sure the culprit of this ill-thought-out prank will know not to repeat his – or her – error. They are children, after all, and I’m certain they did not want to cause the pain that resulted.”

The adamant belief that everyone deserved a second chance and that all had the capability to love and be good… if it had not been his own salvation back then… Severus would have dismissed the Headmaster as a fool. But it would be dangerous to dismiss the old wizard because of this weakness. He had won against Grindelwald, he was still a powerful man, able to duel with the best.

“Snape,” the old Auror suddenly snapped from the side, throwing his napkin onto his empty plate, “I can’t see the Dark Mark anymore. Care to explain?”

Severus sighed and reminded the Headmaster that he had told him of the change the Dark Lord had made to his Dark Mark – to call him with a slow build in warmth and not a sudden pain – and that he himself had decided it was not something they needed to discuss further. And therefore Severus never got around to telling him that the Mark now was invisible most of the time.

The Potions Master was glad they had met over lunch, because as soon as the break was nearing its end, he had a reason to leave the office and return back to the dungeons to teach the next class of potions. Effectively fleeing the inquisitive stares of three blue eyes and one magical one.

On his way down to the dungeons, Severus contemplated his plans. Originally he had planned to ask the Headmaster for the use of his pensieve, so he could review his memories of the previous breakfast more efficiently. He was quite sure he had a good idea who had put the potion in Mr. Slytherin’s goblet or food. But he would like to check it in a pensieve, as those were a great tool for properly analysing events only observed in passing. Much better than only relying on his – albeit really good – memory-recalling abilities.

He would have to ask his Lord for a pensieve. He knew the Dark Lord had at least one on hand. But he was still unsure if he wanted to view that memory of the night of all Hallows Eve ‘81 standing on a bookshelf in his bedroom. Banishing that thought, Severus stepped into his classroom, preparing it for the next lesson.

Barty had reminded him just after breakfast that he had promised Xerxes to come over to the school he was building today, and set the ward stones and start on the weaving of the wards themselves. Marvolo had to admit that a personal secretary was a useful position to have filled. The number of appointments he had each day and week had started to surpass his own willingness to organize them. To have Barty do it was a remarkable improvement.

Slipping on the sturdy dark-brown wool robes he had decided to wear today, and storing the notes he had made while planning the wards in one of its pockets, Marvolo walked out of Griffin House to apparate over to Xerxes’ home. As he never before had been at the actual school building, he could not yet apparate there without being called by the Dark Mark. And as he preferred to reserve
this means of travel for actual emergencies, they would use the floo to reach their destination.

“Marvolo!” he was greeted in the reception room of Nott House by the Head of the family, who was smiling... dare he say grinning? “I’m almost ready to leave. Let me get my cloak and the materials and I will apparate us over to the school.”

A few minutes and a blink of an eye later they were standing between several nice buildings constructed from the stone of the surrounding lands. The lawns were cut short, some late flowers blooming by the gravel ways and around the buildings. At the edge of the grounds Marvolo could make out a high wall topped with ornamental metal spikes between the trunks of fall-coloured trees and a few bushes. Xerxes really had found a nice place for his school.

“You have brought the quartz crystals?” Marvolo asked, starting to let himself feel the place to determine where best to place the anchoring stones, how to orientate the whole big ward to cover the area, and how to align the smaller wards Xerxes wanted on the individual buildings.

“Yes. As well as the elemental silver and gold you wanted me to bring,” the grey-haired wizard answered, holding a black velvet bag up to indicated he indeed had brought the material.

“Good,” Marvolo murmured, his eyes searching the place, deeply concentrating. “We will need to place the smaller individual wards first. Alert for fires outside the fireplaces, keeping out several really bad and dangerous creatures, alerts reacting to several of the more dangerous magics, anti-apparation, anti-portkey, what else?”

Xerxes told his old friend and Lord the wards he wanted on the buildings – not for the first time – while they walked around the whole perimeter, Marvolo marking the best places to put the anchoring stones. When they were finished, those would disintegrate and created magically charged spots holding the wards up and in place.

Once the layout of all of the wards was sorted out, they headed inside and to one of the workshops where Marvolo started with on etching the needed runes into the crystals and filling them with gold and silver.

First he created the array of crystals that would be placed in the headmaster’s office, which would control the wards as well as the alarms when something was amiss. After that he started to work on the larger crystals, which would be the anchors for all of the wards.

Xerxes watched his friend work and finally asked, “What is on your mind, Marvolo? You are distracted. Maybe I can help?” He seemed fairly confident that this was an instance when he needed to be a friend and not a follower, as he did not look nervous, but concerned.

Sighing, Marvolo set his wand down and looked up from the crystal he was working on. “You heard that someone put a potion in Henry’s food, and he got ill enough that he had to spend the night in the infirmary?”

“No,” Xerxes answered with a confused frown on his face. “When did that happen? I heard about quite a few pranks being played on him, but not about that.”

“Yesterday. Severus informed me the moment he found my son in one of the rest rooms, led there by your heiress.” Marvolo sighed again and decided on the spot that Xerxes was a good person to ask for help in finding a way to shield Henry from all the dangers posed by his house mates. “I asked if he wanted me to find a way to get him better protection. He said yes. I thought about possible ways all through last night. Consequently I did not get much sleep, but I could not come up with anything really useful either.” He rubbed his hand over his eyes and settled back on the
“Maybe you should enlist Lucius in finding something. He was a member of the board for quite
some time until he lost the position. He should be familiar with most of the bylaws, even the more
obscure ones.”

Nodding absentmindedly, Marvolo resumed the edging and lining of the runes required for the
wards. “I thought about getting him separate rooms. As the heir to one of the Founding families I
think he is entitled to them if he truly wants, or there is a good enough reason. Maybe it would help
to get an elf to watch over him to collect evidence on who is the one behind all this...” He trailed
off and they sat awhile in silence, the sound of crystal being carved and the bubbling of molten
metal the only sounds.

Xerxes hummed thoughtful. “While I was searching in my family’s chronicles for more Squibs cast
out in the past, I found an account of one re-sorting.”

Marvolo snorted. “Re-sorting? That is a myth. I never saw anything about that. Only unproven
rumours. And I actually own a few diaries from back in the day when the school was founded.”

Xerxes moved his head from side to side, making a sceptical noise. “The story written there
mentioned parents and younger siblings dying in a big fire. The student was being adopted by
remote family – that would be the Lestrange family in this case – and he no longer felt comfortable
in his old house. It actually sounded rather credible.”

To Marvolo’s still sceptical look, Xerxes added, “I can show you the account. Maybe such rules
were added later, so they would not show up in the really old journals you have? And considering
what the story said happened to the boy, I would guess the circumstances allowing to re-sort a
student would not come up often.”

Again Marvolo nodded. It sounded like a possibility. Maybe with Lucius’ help they could verify if
re-sorting a student was a viable option, and what requirements would have to be met to make it
happen. Seeing how the Gryffindors were acting towards his son, Marvolo would like very much

to get him sorted elsewhere. Of course he would prefer his son – Heir Slytherin – to be in Slytherin
House, but Ravenclaw would be acceptable as well, as would be Hufflepuff, studious or loyal were
good things to be. Thinking about it, Marvolo realised that he was not sure in what house Henry
would be sorted if Gryffindor would not be an option. They all were equally un-likely or likely.

Finished with the last crystal, Marvolo placed them in a wicker basket and stood, walking back out
back out in the open. “How is the rest of the organizing going? Found more children in foster
care?”

“Yes, we found several young boys and girls, and I started on the paperwork to get them relocated
here. That will probably take some time, so I thought we had better get started as early as possible.
The teachers' quarters are already finished. So those teachers staying here because they can’t travel
as easily – true for most of the Squib teachers I found – can live here. And I and London have
started visiting Mug... no, non-magical families with magical children, explaining about magic and
offering a place in a magical primary school. Up til now we have not run into any too much
trouble.”

Marvolo raised a brow at that, a glimmer of amusement in his ruby-red eyes. Not too much trouble?
That sounded like they had encountered at least some trouble.

Xerxes waved the implied question and concerns away. “One father caring for three children alone
was glad to hand over his magical son, happy to have one kid less on his hands. I think he was
really afraid of him.”

“Was? You have already removed him?” Marvolo was confused. The school and home was not ready yet, and he was sure he would have noticed anyone other than them being here while he swept the grounds for magic and the important information to lay the wards correctly.

“He is staying with the family of another kid we invited to attend school here. They already were approved as a foster family, so this was the quickest way we could get the child out of an unsafe environment.”

That made Marvolo hum approvingly. It was a good idea to move children in such unfit environments as soon as possible, and this sounded like a pragmatic and fast solution.

“When will the first teachers move in?”

“As soon as the wards are in place, Marvolo,” Xerxes answered. “It would be a hindrance if there were people here while we work on them.”

“True. Let’s get started then. And please bring the story you found over this evening. It seems like that is a direction worth investigating.”

They worked mostly in silence after that. Only the occasional bird, hare, or squirrel disturbed them. Only the minimal number of words were spoken to coordinate their work.

When it grew too dark to work outside without artificial light, Marvolo returned home and walked into his study to attempt preventing the mount of paperwork from growing too fast. It did not look like that was something he would accomplish.

ooooOOooo

It was Thursday evening, and most of the students were in the Great Hall for dinner. Outside of the feasts it hardly ever happened that all of the students were at a meal at the same time. So Albus stood when he thought that the number of students currently in the Hall was the most he was getting today. And he had to address this now.

As much as he thought Severus was overreacting and that Harry never would react quite the same way as the Potions Master had when he was still a teenager, he had to admit that the last prank had come too close to a real poisoning.

So Albus stood, his robe sparkling in the candlelight, and the students fell quiet one after the other, as those who had seen the Headmaster stand alerted the others to the fact.

“Thank you,” Albus addressed the students with his best grandfatherly smile in place. He would go for the understanding but slightly disappointed elder in this. “As most of you have probably heard by now, someone has played a prank on Mr. Slytherin yesterday at breakfast.” Now he had the full attention of all students, even while a low murmur went through the hall. “While I appreciate a well-played prank, giving another student a potion that has to be carefully measured before consumption is not safe, nor is it fun. If any of you repeat this, the consequences will be severe. Please refrain from malicious pranks.” With that he sat down again. As the students returned to their normal level of noise, clearly agitated by Albus’ little speech, the Headmaster turned to look at his Potions Master, only to notice a small vertical crease between the dark brows.
Taking up his goblet of fruit juice, Albus sighed. It was really hard to make that man happy. But now he had done what he had to do, addressed the issue of the so called bullying, hopefully it would get both the Head of House Slytherin here at Hogwarts and Tom of his back for a while.

ooOoo

At the same time, Harry was flying after the last Quidditch practice to get a clearer head. Angelina had not been able to select between the two possible candidates for the newly vacant position of keeper last Friday. So she had set this new date to choose between Ron – who had been ecstatic to be one of the two possible new players – and Cormac McLaggen.

As she wanted to make sure the new player would work well with the others, all players had to be present, and she finally chose Ron, as the performance of both boys had been equally good, but neither the twins nor Harry had worked well with McLaggen.

Or maybe one should say McLaggen had not worked well with Harry, constantly making snide comments about the seeker, and the twins had taken exception.

Ron had been bouncing around the locker room and Harry had smiled as he send him to go to the tower, telling him of his plan to fly a few moments more before returning to the castle. The week so far had been hard – he was happy it was already Thursday – and Ron had nodded in understanding for Harry’s need to just fly for a bit. So he had showered and changed intend to go and eat something, and Harry had returned to the pitch and launched into the air.

By now Harry was truly chilled and feeling much better than he had for the whole day. Since his hasty retreat from the Defence lesson on Monday, and his release from the hospital wing the next day, murmurs and giggles had followed him. Some saw his escape as some great feat – no one liked the toad – and others were laughing over the reason for it. It had added a rather awkward component to the whole mess of rumours about him. Leaving all of that behind speeding along on his broom had felt wonderful. But now it was starting to rain, so it was time to return to the castle.

About to descend and land near the lockers, Harry suddenly felt a warning prickle along his spine and dove to the side, like he had spotted the snitch and had to change direction unexpectedly.

A spell, red in colour like a stunner, flew past him and in an instant he had his wand in hand. He was being attacked! Scanning the ground, the stands, for the one attacking him through the falling rain and growing twilight, his years of practice at following the erratic flying snitch helped him to avoid several additional spells. Either there was a good dueller attacking him – and the fact he had not been hit yet was a point against this idea – or there was more than one person casting spells, as they were coming rather quickly at him.

And then he spotted them, three figures standing close to the base of one of the stands, hidden mostly in the shadows, but giving their position away by the spells they were casting in Harry’s direction.

Remembering his practice for the third task last school year, Harry cast three quick stunners and managed to drop all three of his attackers. Not caring if they had hurt themselves falling and not wishing to stay for when they would wake up again, Harry turned his broom and flew over to the castle entrance to land there.
The rain was falling heavily by the time Harry had made it to the entrance, and dinner had already finished half an hour ago. Without really thinking about what he was doing, still trying to come to terms with the fact that there were students here who had no qualms about killing him – what other outcome was to be expected if he was struck with a stunner while up in the air on his broom? – Harry shouldered his broom and wandered down the steps into the dungeons. The only thing he knew was that he had no desire to be badgered by Ron and Hermione about what had happened, because he was sure he looked as bad as he felt.

So he walked through the dungeons, avoiding the entrance to the kitchen as a few Hufflepuffs were coming from that direction down the corridor, and finally ending up in front of the stretch of wall where the Slytherin common room was located.

The green-eyed, drenched teenager stood there for several minutes, clutching his Firebolt in his hands. Behind this wall were the Slytherins. The students who had taunted him in the past, who had worn badges to humiliate him, children of Death Eaters. Students with parents who had sworn their lives and service to the man that had adopted him. Children who had let him be since school had started again.

Theo was behind this wall. The boy that had shown Harry how to prepare a quill the right way for him to write with it. Who had played chess with him. Draco was there too, and Daphne.

Some student had just tried to kill him. He needed a place to get warm again and he needed to inform a teacher, needed their help. At the moment he was more likely to get both of those things here in Slytherin territory than anywhere else in the castle. He had not forgotten how Professor McGonagall had brushed aside his plea for help that first time with the stone.

Maybe it was time he gave Professor Snape a chance to prove he was different from his colleague.

Without really thinking about it, Harry hissed `.Open:` to the door and stepped through the opening the sliding wall revealed. The room was filled with students, playing, working on their homework, and all faces turned to the door as Harry walked in.

ooOoo

Theo looked up from his transfiguration essay as the door to the common room opened. It was a weekday, so all Slytherins had returned to their House the moment dinner was over. Their Head of House was of the opinion that they could use the library after lessons or in their breaks and therefore there was no reason for anyone to be out of the house after dinner.

So the door opening now was kind of unusual.

His eyes got impossibly wide as he saw who was standing in the doorway. Harry. And he looked like he had seen the ghost of a loved one he still thought alive. Pasty pale, drenched to the bones, eyes wide and hair matted against his forehead.

Theo let his quill fall from his hand to his parchment, making sprinkles of ink over the few paragraphs he had written so far, and walked – no hurried, over to his friend.

He heard Draco speak to one of the others sitting at their table, a part of their study group. “Pansy, get the Professor.” A chair scraped over the stone floor, low murmurs made their way around the room.
“What’s happened to him?” “How did he get in?” “Why did he come here?”

“Harry? What happened? Are you injured?” Theo slowed his pace on the way over to the other boy, one hand stretched out, all his movements slow and deliberate. He did not want to risk startling him. Someone that had duelled with the Dark Lord and walked away alive, a boy under seventeen and winner of the Tri-Wizard Tournament... Let’s just say he did not want to risk startling him while he still held his wand in his hand.

Slowly Theo walked his friend over to one of the couches, one arm held by the elbow, two of the younger years abandoning their places there to make room for the heir of Slytherin. All eyes in the room were fixed on the Gryffindor in their midst, wondering what had brought him here in this state of shock.

One of the older prefects took the broom from Harry and placed it near the fireplace so the water dripping from it would not soak the carpet. Daphne brought over one of the blankets kept on a shelf, normally used by the Slytherins in winter to get a little additional warmth, and wrapped it around the totally wet, green-eyed teen.

By now Theo was really worried. He had heard Harry make jokes about the Dark Lord behind the Dark Lord’s back. What had happened to put him into this kind of state?

The silent speculations, the looks and the tension were almost palpable in the air.

“How did you get in?” Crabbe asked rather loudly with his gruff voice from his place near the windows into the lake.

And for some odd reason, that got through to Harry, who focused his gaze on the burly teenager, blinked slowly two times, and finally answered. “Parseltongue master password, I think.”

Before they could get Harry to explain more, Professor Snape came in from the door to his quarters around one of the many corners – followed by Pansy – somehow not any less intimidating without his billowing black robes.

ooOoo

Severus set the cup of strong tea with honey down on his small side table next to his favourite wingback chair by the fire in his private quarters. He had declined the invitation to a game of cards in Filius’ quarters and had finished the marking for the day before dinner. Now he could read up on a few spells and enchantments used to detect potions in drink or food.

When he had studied for his mastery, he only had read about them in passing, focusing on antidotes and very specific and specialised healing potions. But now with the task to shield Henry Slytherin from further attempts at poisoning, he found himself with new motivation to study this field. Maybe he could create a set of plates, utensils, and goblets to prevent tampering, or a bracelet to alert the wearer to substances that had no place in normal food. In concert with the house-elves, he might just be able to prevent events like Monday from repeating.

It was disconcerting just how the son of Lily seemed to attract trouble. And by now Severus had to admit that the boy did not always do anything to cause the trouble to find him. Zabini throwing something into his potion to explode it, or the Gryffindors pranking him, was certainly not provoked by his Lord’s heir.
Sighing as he sat down and placed his feet on a low padded footstool, Severus took the first book from his small stack as an alarm informed him that one of the prefects was standing at his door.

And he had hoped for a peaceful evening. Sighing again – this time in regret for the need to get up – Severus walked over to the door connecting his rooms to the Slytherin common room. With a little luck it would not be anything really serious. Maybe a homesick first-year, or someone in need of a pain potion.

When he opened his door and saw Miss Parkinson standing there with worry prominent on her face, he knew it would not be something easy to solve that had brought her here.

“Sorry to interrupt your evening, sir. Po… Mr. Slytherin walked into the common room a moment ago. He is drenched and looks like he is in shock. Draco sent me to get you,” the brunette girl rushed out, looking concerned and confused in equal measures.

“Has he any visible injuries?” Severus asked of the prefect, already falling into emergency mode, getting his wand out to summon his emergency kit of potions.

“I have not seen any, sir.”

Deftly catching the bag from the air, Severus motioned for the girl to precede him and started to walk into the direction of the big main fireplace. As far as he knew, the slightly contorted layout of the common room of Slytherin house was a unique feature. Considering that two of the houses resided in towers, it was a reasonable assumption to make.

He rounded the last corner and passed by the new prefect, who was slowing down. The sight that met his eyes was one to behold. All students belonging to Slytherin House were in the common room looking at a boy in Gryffindor robes, wrapped in a dark-green woollen blanket, settled on the settee right next to the big fireplace.

The tension in the room was almost thick enough to walk on. But what the children thought about this was not the most important thing at the moment. Settling on his knees in front of the shivering teenager, his hair plastered to his brow wet with rain, Severus set his potions kit down beside him and let his wand fall into his hand.

“Mr. Slytherin, please tell me if you are injured.” Not waiting for the boy to answer, Severus cast the basic diagnostic charm he once had learned to use on the battlefield and now used to determine if he had to send a student to Madame Pomfrey.

“I don’t think so, Professor. They only cast stunners as far as I could tell.” The answer sounded empty and distant. A clear sign that Mr. Slytherin was in shock. As the diagnostic came back with nothing more serious than slight hypothermia, Severus was inclined to believe that there were no injuries.

“Who cast stunners at you, Mr. Slytherin? And where were you at the time?” He really wanted to know why the boy had come here, but the information of who might have attacked the child he tried so hard to protect was of greater importance. He opened the leather case in which he stored the potions he needed regularly and got out a calming draught and a dose of pepper-up. No need to risk that his Lord’s heir would get a cold.

The boy took the two phials without complaint and answered while steam was streaming from his ears. “We had another Quidditch practice before dinner today. After, I wanted to fly a bit to clear my head. I was just about to land when suddenly spells flew past me. There were three, standing by the Ravenclaw stands. I stunned them and flew to the castle. Then I came here.”
“You are safe here,” Severus assured the boy before he turned his attention to the two snakes hovering next to him and his patient. “Mr. Nott, Mr. Malfoy, make sure Mr. Slytherin gets to take a hot shower and has dry clothes, and do not let him leave until I return.” Both boys nodded, their faces serious, and they helped the other teenager to stand, walking him over to the entrance to the corridor with the boys’ dorms.

Severus closed his case and walked back to his rooms and his floo. He took a pinch of floo powder and sank to his knees in front of the fireplace. “Head of Ravenclaw quarters!” he shouted and threw the powder into the flames, sticking his head in as soon as they turned green.

He was greeted by the sight of the other three Heads of House sitting at a small table, their favourite beverages standing next to each of them, playing a game of cards. Filius turned on his slightly higher chair to look at the fireplace.

“Severus! Have you changed your mind? We can start over if you want to join in!” The small Charms Master was obviously in a good mood, smiling brightly at the head of Severus stuck in the green flames of the floo.

“I’m sorry, Filius, but we have somewhat of an emergency here.” He turned his gaze to Minerva. “Mr. Slytherin just walked into the Slytherin common room and claimed that someone has attacked him with stunners while he was flying on his broom over the pitch. I would like to ask for your assistance in checking the pitch for evidence or maybe the perpetrators themselves.”

This proclamation brought forth appropriately horrified expressions and exclamations from his colleagues, and they arranged to meet at the main entrance. Before Severus could retreat from the fire – his knees did not like this treatment – Minerva asked, concern evident in her voice. “Is Mr. P… Slytherin all right?”

“He only got a little wet because of the rain, and the situation is obviously a shock, but he will be all right.” And with that Severus got his head out of the fire and collected his heavier robes. If Mr. Slytherin’s state was anything to go by, the weather was not favourable for a late-night investigation near the Quidditch pitch.

ooOoo

Draco was sorting through his things in the search for a set of pyjamas he could lend to Henry, all the while thinking about what had happened this evening. Someone had cast stunners at Henry Slytherin while the teenager had been flying on his broom. Depending on the height, direction, and speed, that could have killed the Gryffindor seeker.

And after defending himself by stunning his attackers -- while still being in the air! -- he had come to Slytherin. Draco was not sure what he felt about this, but at the moment he had to fulfil the unspoken order of his Head of House. Make sure that the Dark Lord’s heir was well cared for.

Theo was leaning against the wall by the door that led from their dorm into the bath they had to share. Water was running, as the green-eyed teen was taking the prescribed hot shower. Draco took a set of green silken pyjamas out of his pile of night clothes, as well as one of the warmer dressing gowns.

“Do you think the professor will find the attackers?” Theo asked, his attention fixed on the door
and the sounds behind it, making sure he would notice should the one taking a shower slip and fall.

“If they really were only three... they should still be unconscious. But if there was even one more... I don't think they will get them today. And I wonder what will happen to Henry. I have never seen any of us this singled out.”

Theo nodded. “That's probably because he is only a Slytherin in name, and all the other Houses do not see him as one of us.”

The water stopped running. “We need to make sure he doesn't go anywhere alone from now on,” Draco stated quietly, making sure they were not heard by the Dark Lord’s son. Theo only nodded as the door opened to a blushing boy, wrapped in a big towel.

Smirking, Draco floated the clothes he had selected over to Henry. “Here, you can borrow these for the moment.”

Henry gave a weak smile. “Thanks. Maybe I can organize something warm for us to drink.”

Theo raised a brow, clearly skeptical about this claim. “Dobby!” Henry called, once he had changed into the clothes provided by Draco and stepped out of the bathroom again. The name sounded familiar, and the moment the elf popped into their dorm, Draco knew why it did. That was the elf they had lost at the end of Draco’s second year. Still overly eager, still hyperactive, but now wearing a small tower of hats and a pair of mismatched, eye-watering, brightly coloured socks.

“Master Harry Potter, sir! Dobby is happy to serve the bestest wizard!” Seeing the small elf again after all these years, Draco remembered why he had not taken long to forget this particular elf. His bubbly way of talking and acting was slightly annoying.

“Please, it’s just Harry! Can you get us some hot chocolate to drink, please? I got rather wet and cold earlier.” With an act of pure will power, Draco kept the sneer from his face. Never would he sink so low as to ask an elf to do something for him. Any self-respecting wizard ordered them to do what the wizard wanted done.

Either way, the eager nodding indicated that they would get what Potter asked for.

A few moments later they sat on Theo’s bed – Henry under the duvet – each nursing a mug with hot chocolate and talking about Quidditch tactics, while Henry wrote a letter to his godfather. Theo had provided the quill and ink, Draco had sponsored some parchment.

When it became time to go to bed, a cot appeared in the room, making sure they did not have to share beds. Henry walked over to the cot after he had called the hyperactive Dobby again to take away the mugs and to deliver the letter to Lord Black in the morning. Sending it by owl would take too long.

Not long after, the others walked in, and they went to bed straight away, without the usual banter and ribbing. Even when the Gryffindor in their dorm had the last name Slytherin, he still was a Gryffindor and therefore an outsider. Or at least Draco thought so. He was not entirely sure.

ooOoo

The four Heads of House had met in the entrance hall, casting water-repelling charms on each
other before they started to walk down to the Quidditch pitch.

They were grim and did not talk much, wands lit with strong lumos charms held near the ground, searching for evidence that someone had walked here recently.

But only when they reached the ground near the Ravenclaw stands did they come onto such evidence. There were tracks from someone running through the mud, flattened places where three heavy objects had fallen to the ground – possibly from three bodies from people that had been stunned, making the story told by Mr. Slytherin more likely – and more tracks from feet running up to the castle.

“There was someone here, just as Mr. Slytherin claimed,” Pomona stated, holding her wand high to look for things that might have been left behind. Anything to help them determine who had tried to murder someone tonight.

“Seems like they had backup not far away. Someone helped them to escape rather quickly. I don't think that we can learn who it was with certainty now,” Filius stated, a grim expression on his face.

Severus nodded. They could try to ask who had returned late to their common room, but he doubted that anyone would be willing to talk to the aurors, or that the Headmaster would allow them to even call them here. “We need to inform the Headmaster, the boy's father, and the aurors,” Severus said calmly turning together with the others, certain that he would not get much sleep tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Dear Padfoot,

I'm well and safe. I know no letter with good news ever begins this way, but I think it's the most important thing to tell you at the moment.

You remember the pranks I told you about, and the ideas you wrote me on how to retaliate? (the one spell to let all hair grow several centimetre, or the one to change their skin to a garish orange, nasty stuff Sirius!) Well as long as I'm not sure who is the one doing this, I'm not comfortable to just cast those on just anyone. So I will wait. But keep sending ideas, they make me laugh and that's worth a lot at the moment!

Today after Quidditch tryouts – Ron made keeper! – I went for a bit of flying to get away from it all for a bit. It started to rain and I was about to land as three, or so, people started casting stunners. Please! No need to explode or do something rash. I'm perfectly fine! I got back to the castle and informed a teacher. Now I'm sitting in bed, surrounded by friends, hot chocolate to drink and am writing this letter.

I just thought it would be better if I were the one to inform you. Not even sure that the school will inform my godfather.

I will write as soon as I know if the teachers found who cast the stunners, or if I catch one of the bullies and can aim your spells at them.

See you soon

Harry

Sirius sat down rather heavily on his bed. Just as he had left his bathroom after his early morning shower, a bubbly house-elf had popped into his room, holding a letter. After Sirius had accepted the missive, the rather curiously clad elf had vanished again.

Now Sirius was sitting on his bed, nude except for the towel wrapped around his middle, slowly crunching the letter in his hand. Someone had tried to murder his godson! The only thing remaining of James and Lily, two of his best friends. The boy he had sworn to protect the day the proud father had placed the baby in Sirius' arms. And whom he had failed already once by going after that traitorous rat.

Moving swiftly, Sirius stood from the bed, letting the towel fall without concern, walking over to his wardrobe – slightly enlarged since the day of his trial, now suited to his duties as Lord Black – haphazardly selecting what to wear and throwing it on.

He thundered down the stairs, coming by Remus on the way down to the ground floor. “Sirius!
Hey! What has you so riled up?” the sandy-haired wizard called after his friend, turning to follow him downstairs.

Sirius stalked up to the front door, intending to apparate over to Griffin House. Then he stopped abruptly, a bewildered Remus colliding with him. The black-haired wizard could feel his heart pounding in his fury. Apparating in this state probably was not the cleverest thing to do. And maybe he would not even be able to get into the house if he apparated to the front garden. Who knew what that bastard had done to the wards since Sirius had last been there? So he should make sure to reach the house inside the wards, which meant he would have to use the Floo.

Ignoring his friend's persistent inquiries, Sirius spun on his heel, dark blue robes swirling around him, and made his way to the kitchen and the Floo in there. He would floo into the receiving room at Griffin House. Most Lords of the Wizengamot had warded those rooms separate from the rest of the house, making sure visitors could come in unannounced, but could not get deeper into the House by themselves.

Sometimes it simply was necessary to go to someone without sending the polite request to be allowed into the house. And as the bastard was a Lord on the Wizengamot… at least his shouts would be heard in the whole house.

With two last big and hurried steps Sirius reached the Floo. Remus only a few meters behind him, bewilderment clear as day on his face.

Letting the crumpled letter fall to the floor, so he could get a pinch of Floo-powder from the tin on the mantle, Sirius ignored another question from his last remaining childhood friend. He threw the powder down, the flames of the fire turning green, and stepped into the Floo, calling out the address. “Griffin House!” In a flash Lord Black vanished and left behind his friend, bending down to pick up the parchment from the floor next to the floo.

ooOoo

The three wizards sat around the study, rubbing their eyes tiredly. They had been up all night, reading old accounts of their various families, searching old school records – copies from the days Lucius had been a member of the board at Hogwarts – and a few really old Ministry records, for precedents they might use.

Now Marvolo was tired and ready for bed. But he knew he most likely would not get any sleep at all this day. He should take a stimulant potion to get himself through the day. Because he needed to act on the news a doe patronus had brought him yesterday evening. Someone had tried to murder his son on the grounds of Hogwarts castle. The letter that arrived with more details later – but still rather short and devoid of anything really useful – lay almost forgotten between all the other parchments on the table between them.

It was simply unacceptable not to act on that blatant show of disrespect. All of the Wizengamot would expect him to use all the laws, rules and traditions he could get his hands on to protect his heir and prosecute the attackers. His Death Eaters, on the other hand, would be highly bewildered if he did not react with appropriate violence to this attack on his powerbase. Either way, he would have too much to do today to get even an hour of rest.

At least he and his two followers had found quite a bit they could work with. Above all, he needed
to see his son and speak with him. He would like to avoid the mistake Dumbledore had so clearly made in excluding the boy from decisions so important to him and his life.

Marvolo stood, rubbing his hand over his red and red-rimmed eyes again, and walked a few times up and down to get his circulation back up to counter his exhaustion.

He was about to go over the plan once more with Lucius and Xerxes, when he heard an enraged call from somewhere in the house. The receiving room, maybe?

“Slytherin! You bastard! Come down here and talk to me!” An angry male was down in the receiving room, it seemed. Sighing tiredly, Marvolo walked over to the door of the study, waving for the other two to follow him. Their whole way to the Floo was accompanied by the insults and taunts voiced rather loudly by a man who probably was Lord Black, judging by the choice of words.

As they entered the room currently holding the new Lord Black captive, Marvolo turned to the blond Lord walking behind him. “Go home, Lucius, contact your acquaintance on the board for me, I want to meet him at the gates of Hogwarts... an hour from now?”

Lucius bowed his head – visibly refraining from kneeling down in proper greeting – before he acknowledged Lord Black with a small nod and walked by the fuming wizard to the Floo to vanish with the call of, “Malfoy Manor!”

“Did you have anything to eat this morning, Lord Black?” Marvolo asked of the man now silently glaring at him, further enraged at his anger and the topic he wanted to talk about being ignored. “I was informed of the attack yesterday evening and have been searching for possibilities to deal with it all night. Do you want to accompany me to the school?” The anger in Lord Black’s gray eyes slowly ebbed away to be replaced by caution and confusion.

The younger man nodded slowly. “Would make quite the impact if we were to go there together. You said something about breakfast, Slytherin?”

“Xerxes, please be so kind and take Lord Black to the dining room. Get the elves to make you some breakfast. I need to shower and change.” Without waiting for Xerxes to acknowledge his orders, Marvolo turned around and walked up the stairs to his room. A cold shower and new clothes, as well as a potion to get through the day, were now in order.

Time to set the official steps to deal with the danger his son was in, into motion. What he wanted to do on the unofficial side... with slightly more options, he would have to decide another time. Preferably after a good night's sleep.

Dolores stood in the staff room, a strong cup of her favourite tea cradled in her hands, observing the turmoil that was going on. She was not sure what she should think about the topic that was being so heatedly discussed by the four Heads of House, the Headmaster, and a few of the other teachers.

They all had been called here, while the students were in their common rooms. She watched and kept to the sidelines as arguments were thrown back and forth.
When Cornelius had offered her this opportunity, she had gladly accepted. But now that she was here, she was beginning to doubt how wise her decision had been. She had hoped that she would gain a measure of control over the one she wanted to get rid of. After all, she was in a position of authority over the boy. But he did not react to her taunts as she had thought he would. The story about his blowing up his uncle's sister was still one of those told during Ministry parties and get-togethers. Accidental magic at the age of thirteen… it was all too clear that the child had a volatile temper.

But none of that had shown in the few lessons she’d had with the Potter child in her classes thus far. Nor could she find him breaking any rules – that she was allowed to enforce – out of the class. She would have to work harder to discredit the boy, as getting him killed had not worked out.

“Albus, when there has been a murder attempt on school grounds, we are required to call the aurors,” the disgusting half-breed charms professor was stating from his place on the stack of cushions. Most of the others were nodding, and Dolores knew that it was indeed in the rules.

Once, she had thought the Dark Lord was right in what he was doing. Preserving traditions, bolstering the old families. But obviously something must have gone wrong when he got himself a body again. He was working against her. Against laws that would get them rid of the scum in their world. Eventually.

Since the so-called Dark Lord had claimed his seat in the Wizengamot, he had worked on those members she had gotten on her side by painstakingly working on them for long months – sometimes even years – to get the werewolf laws passed. And one by one they had fallen to statistics and smiles, and she was losing her base.

So Dolores stood in the staff room watching the Headmaster – that senile old man – argue with the professors. She was not sure how she should play this. Siding with the professors insisting on calling the aurors and therefore sticking with Ministry policies? Or siding with the Headmaster and hopefully getting into a better position here at the school?

“Severus, my boy. Minerva. We do not know that Mr. Slytherin is telling the truth. We could get students of ours into serious trouble, without actual proof!” the Headmaster said into the room, shaking his head sadly, walking up and down in front of the windows, his hands clasped behind his back.

“I’m sure Mr. Slytherin would be willing to provide his memory, and we can ask the students who arrived back late into the common room yesterday. Ask them where they were. We will be able to find out what happened if we do not dawdle now.” The Head of Slytherin was an enigma of sorts. He was rumoured to have been a spy – she was not sure if that was the truth or some convenient lie like the claim to be under the Imperius – and kept his students well in line. Of all her colleagues, he seemed the one she felt the most kinship to. He was strict and did not allow any tomfoolery. She liked that in people she had to work with.

“I already have asked the elves to check if any students returned with muddy or wet clothes yesterday evening,” the Potions Master continued, staying calm despite the high emotions around him.

“I agree with Minerva, Severus, Pomona, and Filius, Albus.” the medi-witch added, looking disapprovingly at the Headmaster. She seemed to believe the Potter brat was telling the truth. “He seems stable, but definitely experienced a great shock recently. Just before I came here I went down to the Slytherin dorms to check on him.” She nodded in Severus’ direction, so it was likely that he had asked her to check on the boy.
The Headmaster turned to face the faculty. “Mr. Slytherin will have to return to his own common room. If a student is not required to stay in the infirmary, they are to sleep in their own House’s dorms.” There was a trace of steel in the old man’s voice.

Dolores – not listening to the answer from the mediwitch to this – still was not sure what was the best course of action here. It was just too unpredictable. As long as she did not know who was behind the supposed attack, she could not make a well-reasoned decision.

“We should wrap this up so you all are able to arrive in your classrooms on time.” His blue eyes twinkled and he gave them all a bright, grandfatherly smile.

“No, we will not gloss over this as if nothing has happened at all, Albus!” insisted the irate Transfiguration Professor and deputy Headmistress. “We will call in the aurors and make sure the matter is handled the right way!”

“We can’t leave the students in their dorms the whole day, Minerva.”

Should she say something? Agree with one or the other?

Before she managed to come to a decision, the Runes Professor, Bathsheda Babbling, spoke up from her seat further down the table, cup with tea still in hand. “Why don’t we get them all into the Great Hall, to study quietly, finish their homework? All of us can set more tasks to work on there in silence. And only a few of us would be needed to supervise. I would volunteer. So you, Headmaster, and the Heads of House can work with the aurors to resolve this matter quickly.”

This suggestion was met with approval from the majority of the staff, Madame Hooch and Professor Sinistra offering to help monitor the children. In a spur-of-the-moment decision, Dolores offered her help as well. Better to be there with the students and make sure nothing untoward would happen, than trailing along after the aurors.

But even though most of the professors agreed with the idea to let the students study in the Great Hall and call the aurors, Dumbledore still argued as did that oddball Trelawney. It seemed that it would be a long day.

Sighing almost silently to herself, Dolores refilled her teacup, watching the unorganized mess called a meeting.

ooOoo

Standing together with the other three Heads of House, Severus was appalled that Albus Dumbledore was about to repeat an error he had made before. Not enough that he had left not just one, but three boys in abusive home situations – he remembered all too clearly the Dark Lord smashing an ornamental figure upon learning about the abuse Henry had endured – no, he was trying to sweep another murder attempt under the carpet.

Seeing the Headmaster refusing to call the aurors, Severus was glad they had made copies of their memories the moment they had returned from their search at the Quidditch pitch. Now one copy was resting in a secret compartment in his private ingredients store and another he had sent to Lucius.

If the old manipulative codger should try to make them forget, those copies would be safe and
could be used, maybe even to remove the man from his last major position of influence. It was a big change in a short time, that Severus almost hoped for a new Headmaster for the school. Noticing the black fingertips just poking out of the over-long robe sleeves, he wondered if maybe a more natural cause would remove the man sometime soon.

This time it would be not as easy to hush everything up as it had been when Black had tried to murder Severus by werewolf. This time, the almost victim was the son of a Lord of the Wizengamot, not of a disowned pureblood witch and an unemployed drunk of a muggle. The whole of Slytherin House had witnessed Henry Slytherin walking into their common room, had heard him telling his story. Those involved were not just a werewolf determined – almost desperate – to keep his secret, the near-victim, the one orchestrating the disaster, and a friend to all but the victim.

With dark satisfaction Severus watched Albus trying to regain control over the situation, but with every minute it became clearer that he would not be able to get his way this time. They would call the aurors and find the would-be murderers.

He nodded to Madame Pomfrey for her insistence that Mr. Slytherin needed monitoring. That would make sure he did not have to return to the dorm where he would be in much greater danger until the attackers had been found, and agreed with the plan to gather the students in the Great Hall for supervised studying to keep them out of trouble while making it possible to search the school.

Listening to his colleagues and keeping the door to the room always in view, the Potions Master waited for his Lord to make his appearance. Any moment now the pandemonium would increase with the arrival of Lord Slytherin.

Suddenly there was a short sharp burn where his mark was hidden, and he knew that this was a warning that the Dark Lord was on his way.

oooOOooo

Early in the morning of Friday, Theo woke up and looked over to the cot sitting across from his bed. When he realized the cot was empty, the bathrobe gone, Theo almost jumped out of his bed, slipped into his slippers, threw on his own bathrobe, and strode hastily from the dorm, down the corridor, and into the common room.

There by the fire Harry sat curled under a green woollen blanket in one of the wingback chairs, reading.

Exhaling in relief, Theo walked over, falling into the chair across from Harry’s. “What are you reading? I can’t read the title.”

Smiling a little, Harry looked up from his book. “It's called *Magic of Intent*. I didn't dare read it up in Gryffindor tower. It’s written in Parselscript, and is the only copy. I didn't want to risk exposing it to possible damage. I had Dobby fetch it for me when I sent him to get a message to Hermione.”

They sat there a moment in silence, Theo contemplating what to say now. What do you talk about with someone who had, due only to luck, just recently escaped a murder attempt?

“You had me scared there for a moment, Harry,” Theo admitted. It was so easy to talk openly with the other teenager. Easier than with any of the others. He wondered why that was.
“Sorry,” Harry said a little sheepishly. “I was up early and didn’t want to wake any of you, so I came out here, wrote a little note for Hermione – she’ll be worried once she realizes that I didn't get back to the tower last night – and got Dobby to deliver it. Then Madam Pomfrey turned up. Wanted to check me over.” Suddenly the green eyes widened comically. “Oh! She also brought this note.” He got out a scrap of parchment and unwrapped the cocoon he had built around himself, walking over to the notice board, pinning the parchment there. “We shall get breakfast in here.”

Not long after that the first of the other Slytherins came out of their dorms, dressed and on the way to an early breakfast or to finish some homework due today. Theo stood and walked over to the first prefect making an appearance, quickly informing him about the note Harry had pinned to the notice board.

By the time the prefects had understood the order to eat breakfast in the common room and not leave, a crowd of confused students was standing around the exit that did not budge, keeping the students inside.

When Theo finally had found time to dress and walked out of the dorm again, the seventh-year prefect was standing on one of the low tables. “Please listen! Because of investigations regarding some events of yesterday evening, our Head of House ordered that we are to stay in the common room until further notice. Breakfast will be sent here. Please pass the time quietly and come with questions to one of us prefects.”

The breakfast that was delivered was the normal fare they were used to having. But nothing else of the situation was in any way normal. They all were tense. There was a Gryffindor in their midst, reading a book no one else could read, only occasionally speaking with Theo and Draco. All the others tried to ignore the unusual circumstances, working on their homework, playing games, reading. To the glances and gossip from the evening before, speculation about the investigation being conducted was added, only worsening the tension.

Theo really hoped that Professor Snape would come soon to explain a little and break the tension. If they had to spend too much time cooped up in their dorms and the common room, there could – no would – be problems.

ooOoo

Up in the Gryffindor Tower, Hermione was reading the short note Dobby had brought her for the n-th time. She was fairly certain Harry had written it. Even if his writing had changed a lot since the last year, she had seen letters from him and his homework the last few days. This was definitely Harry’s writing.

The content of the letter was what was confusing her. Harry was staying down in the Slytherin dorms because of something that had happened yesterday after the Quidditch training. They should not worry. But combined with the note Professor McGonagall had sent, she was really worried. More than worried.

Because of an auror investigation, all students should stay in the dorms and common room and eat breakfast there until the Head of Gryffindor came to tell them something else.

Her mind was working in overdrive while Ron sat beside her, yawning and not entirely awake yet... not even awake enough to get over to the table set with breakfast.
“Ron, can you tell me why Harry didn’t come to dinner yesterday? Or where he went after training?” She was agitated and unable to stay seated, so she stood, walking up and down a few steps in front of the sofa Ron was slumped down on.

“He said he wanted to fly a bit. Get a clear head.” Ron yawned again and waved his hand in front of him, dismissing the topic.

“Aren’t you even a little bit concerned?” Hermione said, upset about this blasé attitude.

“Oh, don’t fret, Hermione! He wrote he’s fine.” Ron said and waved her concerns away.

The few puzzle pieces Hermione had started to fit into a picture one after the other. Around her the other Gryffindors were chatting and eating their breakfast. Scrambled eggs, fruit salad, toast and rolls, sausages, grilled tomatoes and mushrooms, porridge and bacon.

When would it become necessary to call aurors to the school? Hermione was sure she had read something about that in *Hogwarts: A History*. There were only a few reasons for aurors to be called to the school, as most problems were handled internally. The school always tried to keep as much independence from the Ministry as they could manage. So the aurors would be called only if a student had died under suspicious circumstances. Or when one nearly died.

Harry had been alone on the Quidditch pitch after the training yesterday, if Ron was to be believed. Now taking the many malicious pranks into account, it was likely that someone had attacked him.

But why would he go to the Slytherin common room instead of his own? Her chocolate-brown eyes widened. Because he suspected that the one attacking him was a Gryffindor! So what could they do to help? The teachers had made them stay in their dorms. Maybe to prevent them from destroying evidence?

Quickly she had gathered the older prefects around her and Ron. “I think I know what’s going on.” Her look was intense, and only the way she was focusing on the others and her explanation prevented her from noticing the bemused look on Ron’s freckled face.

“Harry did not come back to the dorm yesterday evening. He was alone on the pitch after training. And today there’s an investigation. I think someone attacked him, and it could have killed him!” Even in her hushed whisper, to keep it secret just a little longer, her need to make the others understand and to act against this rule-breaking was clear.

“And what should we do about it?” one of the others asked what they all clearly were thinking.

“It must have happened between the end of Quidditch training and curfew. So we should note down who was where during dinner and before we all went to bed. When we know that, we can clear most, if not all of us – hopefully – making the investigation run more smoothly?” Nearing the end of her explanation Hermione got more and more unsure. Was that really a good idea? She could not stand doing nothing, only waiting, when one of her friends – maybe her best friend – was in danger. She wanted to solve this mystery. But she also knew that a collection of statements and evidence assembled by students most likely would not be used by the aurors at all. Why should they take her and the others seriously? She did not even know proper procedure.

“We can do that,” the female seventh-year prefect finally conceded. “Do you want to take the lead? It was your idea, after all.”

Hermione nodded and quickly contemplated how such an endeavour should be organized. She quickly realized fast that she probably would get the best response and compliance when she
appealed to their Gryffindor honour, their sense of fair play and chivalry.

Nodding to herself, she walked to one of the more sturdier tables and climbed up, instantly garnering the attention of most of the students. “You all have heard by now that there is an investigation about something that happened yesterday, probably during or shortly after dinner.” The answering murmur going through the crowd was confirmation enough that the rumour mill was working as fast as ever. “We,” she gestured to the other prefects standing by her side, “think that someone attacked Harry, one of our own, almost killing him.” More murmurs, louder this time, forced her to raise her voice just a little. “To make sure none of us is accused of anything, we will write down where everyone of us was, with whom, and what they were doing. It should make finding the true culprit much easier.”

Of course Hermione knew that it most likely had been a Gryffindor, or even several, but by making it sound like the culprit came from somewhere else, she got most of her House to agree to her plan.

Soon a very enthusiastic – and decidedly Slytherin feeling – Hermione and the more reluctant other prefects were organizing groups to be questioned. They wanted to work by year, starting with the oldest and working down to the younger years.

Before they could start in earnest, Cormac McLaggen spoke rather loudly, drawing attention to himself. “And why should we tell you where we were? What right do you have to demand answers from us? Why don't you start with yourself?”

Brown eyes narrowed dangerously. She could not really stand the blond, green-eyed boy, he always came across as quite impressed with himself. Not something that tended to endear a person to her. “Well, I was at dinner, speaking with Ginny about her transfiguration homework. After that I went to the common room to study, and was asked a few questions by different first-years. Then I eventually went to bed.” She managed to keep her irritation out of her voice. It was a reasonable request that she, as the one proposing this, should be one of the first to answer.

“Weasley – the fifth-year one – I didn't seen him after dinner!” another of the sixth-years said. The qualifier about the year was kind of a tradition since Percy had come to Hogwarts. There always were too many Weasleys around to leave another identifier off.

With a sinking feeling in her stomach – working hard not to let her doubt show on her face – Hermione turned to Ron, waiting for his explanation. When his face became red in embarrassment she had to fight to keep calm. Since the day Harry had been adopted, she had feared that Ron would fall back into the patterns from the year before.

Ron spluttered, clearly unsure what he should say, wanting to hide something but totally unprepared.

“He was with us,” one of the twins said, standing. His brother joining him only a fraction of a second later. “We were working on one of our newer ideas, and had asked him for help and his opinion.”

Ron looked relieved, smiling at his older brothers. “Thanks, you two. Wasn’t sure you wanted everyone to know.”

Hermione was so happy that Ron had not had anything to do with the assumed attack that she didn't really hear what the other prefects had to say. Only coming out of her wool-gathering when they started with the seventh-years, making organized lists of names, places, times, and what they had been doing. This was causing quite a bit of ribbing for those that had been with their boyfriend or girlfriend from other Houses, jokes about excessive studying, and comments about almost all the
alibis that were given.

Hermione felt better now that she had something to do that felt productive. She hoped that Harry was indeed fine, as he claimed in his note, and that they did not cause more problems with their impromptu investigation of their own.

ooOoo

“I don’t have a good feeling about this,” one of his friends frantically whispered into Cormac’s ear. He rolled his eyes, sometimes they really were wimps.

“Don’t fret. Really, what can they do? There’s no proof for anything, just stick to the story!” he hissed back, trying to seem unaffected by the interrogation now starting on the other end of the common room.

Why had that bitch of a captain refused him his rightful place on the team? He clearly was a better keeper than that blockhead of a Weasley. He snorted and took another pastry. “Keep cool. We were studying in one of the empty classrooms, practising for defence. Nothing suspicious there.”

He could see his friend was still uneasy about the whole thing. He had not found the will to actually cast anything at the seeker, claiming later that he had kept lookout for them. And it had been fortunate. If he had cast a stunner himself, he most likely would have been hexed himself. That ponce Potter, Slytherin – whatever! – was good with his curses. And they would not have had someone to enervate them so they could get back to the castle fast.

Unconcerned, Cormac refilled his goblet. Should, somehow, someone come to suspect that he was in any way involved, the boy was sure his father would manage to get him out of the pickle. After all, he had an important position in the Ministry. Being part of the courts – and in a high-ranking position too – came with its perks. That his uncles were in influential positions too, one holding the McLaggen seat in the Wizengamot, did no harm either.

“We’ll be fine, if you manage to not make any errors,” was the last he hissed to his friend, hoping the other would manage to keep his act together.

oooOOooo

Shortly after Severus had received the warning, the door to the staff room opened, and three wizards stepped into the room, breaking the lively discussion between Burbage and Vector over whether or not they should allow the students to play games during the supervised time in the Great Hall.

They made an impressive image. The Dark Lord in front, a dark look on his face, followed by Lord Black, eyes narrowed as he took in the room and its occupants. The other wizard, clad in high quality robes in tasteful, conservative colours, only added to the appearance of importance of the group, and Severus was quite sure that he was a member of the board of governors.

The Potions Master managed to keep his surprise at seeing Black and his Lord coming in at the
same time hidden. The others were not as successful in hiding their own surprise at suddenly having three others not belonging to the Hogwarts staff in their meeting.

“Sirius! Tom! What a surprise to see you both here! What brings you to our meeting this fine Friday morning?” Trust the Headmaster to play the part of the one not knowing anything. Dark eyes met with blue ones over the expanse of the room. Severus felt the feather-light touches of the Dark Lord’s mind entering his own, staying in the entrance chamber he had created over the last weeks. He still was fascinated by this form of communication and had spend many an evening before going to sleep on adjusting his shields to accommodate it more easily.

Now he projected an image of himself properly greeting his Lord, going down on one knee, bowing his head. With an image of the young heir of his Lord came the feeling of worry and – for lack of a better term – curiosity. It seemed the Dark Lord wanted to know what Severus could tell him about the boy he had adopted.

In answer he send back the image of the boy sitting between all the Slytherin students, wrapped in a blanket in front of the fire in the common room, projecting a feeling of knowing. It really was not easy to send messages this way.

Then he sent a combined image of Lucius and a phial filled with the silvery mist of a memory, hoping it would be understood that the blond wizard held copies of important memories. Without waiting for an answer, he sent an image of himself using the borrowed Pensieve during the time he had brewed the potion to heal his Lord from Pettigrew’s botched resurrection potion. Hopefully it would be clear that he wanted to borrow the pensieve again.

While the two wizards had been locked in silent communication, Sirius Black had been talking – rather loudly – to the Headmaster. And he still was not finished.

“I was not even informed by you, Albus! Harry is my godson! There was a murder attempt just yesterday! Why are the aurors not here yet?” He gestured with his wand arm over the whole room, indicating the lack of none Hogwarts staff. “I’m really not impressed, Headmaster. You clearly have a problem keeping my godson safe. And I am not happy about it!”

The atmosphere was rather awkward, professors unsure what to say and the Headmaster smiling with twinkling eyes. “Now, my boy, as we are not sure what happened, no one has been informed so far. I’m rather curious why you three are here now.”

Black nodded, still with a dark look. “Harry wrote me a letter, telling me in short words what he thought I needed to know. I went over to Lord Slytherin’s home and we decided to come here. We want to speak with Harry. Preferably soon.”

Severus felt his brow rising. His Lord and Black acting together was not something he had expected. But considering that they both had a vested interest in keeping the boy save, it might not be so surprising. Sometimes necessity made strange bedfellows.

“I agree with Lord Black. On all points. We came because we want to talk with Henry. But before I take the opportunity to see the Gryffindor Dorms, I want to say my piece.”

“Actually,” Severus injected into the conversation – as he knew his colleagues would expect of him – feeling a shiver going down his spine over interrupting his Lord, “the boy is currently staying in the Slytherin dorms. He came there yesterday evening, searching for help. He will move to the infirmary to be monitored by Madame Pomfrey after we are finished here.”
Marvolo had to stop himself from snorting. It was funny, despite the situation, how Severus was playing his part. Clearly the audience the man was playing for at the moment was used to his antagonism towards Lord Black. And the other Lord’s surprised face on hearing that his godson had gone to the Slytherin dorms to find help after being attacked... was a sight to behold.

That Severus Snape was infamous for his sarcasm and lack of fear for insulting others only contributed to the need to interrupt Lord Slytherin in his conversation with the Headmaster. He would not hold it against the man, but he could almost feel the nervousness the Potions Master was giving off over his actions.

So Marvolo only nodded and turned his attention back to the Headmaster. Time to bring their research to good use. “It is most expedient that all four Heads of House and you are currently in attendance.” He waved the chairman from the board – a Mr. Johnson Everard – forward to stand by his side. “In light of the happenings of the last few days, I have come here with a representative of the board to call on at least one not often used bylaw. May I introduce Mr. Everard?”

The Headmaster tried to intervene, to keep Marvolo from continuing, but knowing that the old man could talk circles around most people, he did not pay attention to him, but looked to the other professors.

“This bylaw was set in place when this fine institution was founded, back in the day. Let me cite: ‘Any Heir to one of the Founders – or their guardian – can ask for their own separate rooms, connected to the common room of their House, if their belonging to a Founder’s family causes problems with their housemates’. I think there is no question that the fact my son is Heir Slytherin has caused problems with the other Gryffindors. There were enough incidents with his possessions and his bed that I would like to call on this bylaw.”

A quick look around the room revealed that most of the professors agreed with the assessment that Heir Slytherin sleeping in the Gryffindor dorms was a problem. As Marvolo and Lucius had expected, this one would not meet much resistance. The second was quite another story. He would have to ask Henry first, but he wanted to get the idea out there. So he ignored another attempt from the Headmaster to get control over the conversation back, speaking on.

“There is a more recent bylaw I think Henry might want to use, but I will have to speak with him about it before it is decided. Let me cite the exact wording: ‘If a student is exposed to life-altering events and no longer feels comfortable in the House he or she belongs to, he or she can request the sorting Hat for a re-evaluation of their placement.’” Mentioning re-sorting of any form brought on the expected uproar of protest. All just knew that re-sortings were mere rumour, myth, nothing that really was possible.

The clearing of a throat brought silence a few moments later. All eyes now were trained on Mr. Everard, clad in slate-gray robes and a dark blue silk cravat.

“We all have heard many outrageous stories about re-sorting students, which we know to be false. But there is indeed a bylaw with the wording Lord Slytherin just cited. I know of two actual accounts of its use. If you will, I can explain.” The man’s sweeping gaze quickly recognized that all of the people present – with maybe the exception of the Headmaster – were eager to hear what he had to say.

“One instance was a young boy who had lost his whole immediate family to a big fire, surviving
with heavy scarring, disfiguring him. This led to ridicule by the other students from his house. That he was adopted into the Lestrange family – distant relatives of his – added to the difficulty of his situation. He was re-sorted after he asked the hat for help. The other instance I know of is rather more tragic.” He made an appropriately sad and grave face, while Marvolo wondered if the macabre circumstances of the re-sortings had inspired others to come up with all the false stories circulating.

“The boy witnessed the murder of his mother and younger sister at the wand of his stepfather. Naturally he no longer could live in the house the man had belonged to. Constantly being reminded of the man and what he had done.”

Silence filled the room after the recounting of those stories. Not even the Headmaster was attempting to say anything. Marvolo was a little disappointed. He had hoped the old wizard would try to claim that Henry’s circumstances were not really this life-altering, but it seemed that the old man would not take the risk.

“I think we should now call the Aurors to investigate. It seems that either there was a murder attempted yesterday evening, or false accusations have been raised.”

Here the chairman was interrupted by the witch in pink robes.

“Considering that the boy claiming to be attacked is known for his attention-seeking tendencies and not known for his mental stability…” But before the short woman could drawl any further, Marvolo interrupted her, keeping his temper in check by will alone. She really was getting on his nerves.

“Madame… Professor Umbridge, I would appreciate it if you do not repeat the slander printed in the Prophet last year during the Tournament. I can assure you that Henry indeed did not enter his own name. It was a plot to get him prepared for a ritual that was used to return me to a body.” Here he shuddered on cue. After all, he needed to present the image of one not happy about the means that brought him back into corporeal form. And to be honest, he was not happy with the way it had gone. The rat had made too many errors. It was pure luck that Severus had decided to remain loyal and help in getting him a good body again.

“His claim that he was forced to participate in a ritual was true, after all.” He glared and the witch – the pink robes did not suit her, she looked a little pale – and took a few deliberate breaths. Nodding to the school governor, Marvolo prompted him to continue, not trying to hide the fact that he was impatient for this meeting to be over. He was reasonably sure that this was a normal response for a parent, so he did nothing to hide it. He noted that it was becoming easier to project the expected emotional responses for others to see.

“As I said: we will call the aurors to clear up the events of yesterday evening,” Mr. Everard said decisively, “I will stay on behalf of the board to coordinate the investigation and the other matters we have to accomplish. We can sort out the rooms for Heir Slytherin, and then present the case of his placement to the Sorting Hat, to see if it would consider re-sorting Lord Slytherin’s son.”

Soon a few of the professors left for the Great Hall. The Headmaster went with Mr. Everard of the board up to the Headmaster’s office to call the aurors and talk to the Sorting Hat. The Heads of House left for the common rooms to inform the students of the change to this day’s lessons. Marvolo, together with Lord Black, followed Severus down to the dungeons to talk to Henry.

Marvolo was looking forward to seeing the common room again. And at the same time, he felt a little apprehensive. How would Henry react to him in front of so many witnesses? How in comparison to Sirius Black? Only one way to find out.
Three wizards with dark hair, walked down the corridors into the dungeons. Imposing figures, in billowing robes, striding in silence.

Severus felt decidedly awkward walking down to the common room followed by the Dark Lord and his childhood terror Sirius Black. He was to send the children up to the Great Hall and then escort Mr. Slytherin up to the Infirmary, before meeting with the others and the aurors for the investigation.

They reached the entrance and Severus spoke the password calmly and clearly, causing the door to slide aside and reveal the way into the common room. He noted with interest that Black was not surprised to see the entrance down here. Had he been here before? It was not an unreasonable assumption to make. The man’s younger brother had been a Slytherin after all, as had been all other members of the family. It was quite likely that one of them had mentioned the entrance or described the dorms.

The room was filled with the Slytherins, from first year up to the adult seventh-years, chattering more or less quietly, eating and playing, working on homework or reading. The talk swiftly subsided once the first children noticed their Head of House had just walked in, and the atmosphere shifted into one more tense once they realized that Lord Slytherin himself was present as well.

Mr. Slytherin was sitting near the fire – typically a position of power and prestige – bent over a game of chess he was playing with Mr. Nott, watched by several of the other fifth-years.

The children all looked up once Severus started to speak. “Today’s classes are cancelled. You all will collect your study material, homework, etcetera, and will be working in the Great Hall under supervision while Aurors are here for an investigation.” He noticed that Mr. Slytherin was tense in his chair, as if he wanted to jump up and run over to his godfather, who was equally tense, standing near the entrance, which had closed behind them.

“You have ten minutes to collect what you will need, and will leave together. Mr. Slytherin, you can speak to your father and godfather here in the common room, and will then follow me to the infirmary. Off you go!”

The children scrambled to comply, Mr. Nott exchanging a look with Mr. Slytherin, seemingly getting a nod of reassurance before he left after Miss Parkinson. Mr. Slytherin stood from his chair and started walking over to where they were standing.

Marvolo watched as Henry walked over to them from the seat by the fire he himself had occupied for quite some time of his own schooling here. He was also aware of the few older children waiting to leave the common room for the dorms. Probably to see Lord Slytherin interact with his heir. And Henry was aware of them too. He had a calculating look in his eyes and seemed to come to a decision before he bowed as it was proper, greeting them respectfully.
“Father, Uncle Sirius, I’m happy to see you here. You wanted to speak with me?”

Lord Black flinched at his side, obviously surprised and unhappy that Henry had called Marvolo father. Marvolo felt quite good over this little change, up until now, whether in public or at home, Henry had always had called him ‘sir’, never anything different. Just as he had been instructed – as one of the possibilities – at the beginning.

“Yes, Henry. I’m pleased that you seem to be doing well.” Before Marvolo could explain what he had found and ask if Henry would like to be re-sorted, Lord Black stepped forward and threw his arms around the green-eyed boy.

“Don’t be so formal, Harry! I was so shocked when I got your letter. Never, ever go anywhere alone again, please! I could not live, should I lose you too.” His voice was muffled because he had buried his head in the unruly black hair on Henry’s head. The boy looked a little uncomfortable and patted the bigger man’s back in a consoling manner.

A whispered conversation between Lord Black and his godson followed, too soft to be heard from a few steps away. And the first students began to come back into the common room. Another few moments later, Lord Black stepped back from Henry, straightening his robes and a blush on his face. Maybe he did realize that he had let down his defences a little too much in front of that many Slytherins.

Henry turned to face Marvolo looking at him, and he smiled at his adopted son. The boy had managed to pick so much up over that short a time. Time to tell him what was to happen and get his view on getting re-sorted.

“You remember that I promised to look into possibilities to keep you safe here at school?” Henry nodded and answered briefly and softly, “Yes, I remember, sir.”

“We found two bylaws that can help with that. One I have already called upon, the other can only be asked for by you yourself.”

“What are they, sir?” Severus wandered off to talk to his students, giving them a little more privacy.

“You will get your own rooms off of the common room up in Gryffindor Tower. You will be able to restrict all access, and therefore be safer. The other…” How to present this? Being candid and not embellishing would probably work best in these circumstances. “Seeing that you have endured several life-changing events in the last year, you might ask the Sorting Hat to re-evaluate your House placement, if you wish to. I would recommend this course of action, but in the end it is your decision, if you still feel safe being a Gryffindor. Either way, aurors are being called in to investigate what happened yesterday.”

Henry nodded. “I will have to think about that, sir.”

They did not have much time after that. All the students had assembled in the common room with their book bags and now were departing for the Great Hall. Severus urged Henry to get his things so he could be placed in the infirmary, where he would be safe and watched until he got his own rooms.

Black and Marvolo joined the aurors and staff to talk about what was to happen, and then Marvolo left to attend to his other responsibilities. But first they walked in silent agreement up to the infirmary for Marvolo to say goodbye to Henry, and for Black to stay with him. Henry seemed to be grateful to them both.
“Meeting this evening at my place?” asked Lord Black out of the blue before Marvolo could leave the infirmary to walk back to the edge of the wards.

“To what purpose?” was the cautious reply. Why would Black search him out even more? After all, he had been rather radically anti-dark for most of his life.

“Exchanging information on Harry’s situation,” Black said in a tone of voice that suggested he thought the other man a little slow for even needing to ask. And then the tall, grey-eyed man added more cautiously, “If you have that information assembled I asked for, you might have a look at my place. I do not feel comfortable thinking whatever dark thing you lost might be laying around the house somewhere.”

Quickly thinking if he had actually assembled enough material, Marvolo nodded in assent. Exchanging information on Henry with Black was most likely safe enough. The other wanted to keep the boy safe as well. And getting to look at a house where one of his horcruxes might be hidden? Not an opportunity he could pass up.

“Shall I call ahead? Or should I just step through the Floo?”

“Apparate to the entrance Hall. I assume you have been there before?” A grimace of distaste quickly flashed over the still slightly gaunt face.

“I remember the place,” was all Marvolo said to that. Of course he remembered, but he still had to make sure to appear to be really not fond of memories made as Voldemort.

They nodded to one another, and Marvolo walked out of the white rooms.

Now on to the less legal actions he wanted to take in response to this new attempt at murder on his heir.

oooOoooo

Quite late in the day on Friday the fifteenth of September, the Ministry was buzzing with rumours.

Aurors had been called to Hogwarts. There was talk about an attempted murder, or actual murder of one or several students. The names and numbers of victims and murderers varied. As did the causes of death. From poison over potion explosions up to the killing curse or different weapons, everything was considered a possibility.

These rumours were not sparked by anything the aurors had told. They were the reaction of the people at the Ministry trying to fill in the blanks in the only thing they had heard out of the Auror Department. “There was possibly an incident at Hogwarts that we are investigating.”

Bored people with too much time and imagination could do quite interesting things by retelling a story and altering just a tiny bit in doing so every time.

People love their gossip.

oooOoooo
After a day spent plotting, viewing the memories Severus had sent to Lucius – packing the smaller of his Pensieves for Severus to borrow – and further research into the problem of the unplanned horcrux, Marvolo apparated straight to the step in front of the old Black Town house.

Severus had told him in one of the debriefings after his loyalties had been cleared up that the house had been the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix and had been under the Fidelius charm. As such, Marvolo was unsure what might have been changed in the house since he had been there the last time. After all it had been over a decade ago, he did not wish to risk colliding with anything.

The house looked dirty and derelict. Considering Lord Black had to stay hidden until this summer, and this house had been standing empty for a long time, it was probably no wonder. What he was puzzling over was the substantially better state the Potter properties had been in. In the end it was unimportant – compared to everything else going on – so he took a deep breath and used the knocker to announce his arrival.

The door was opened quickly, and he flinched, suppressing the wish to cover his ears, as a shrieking sound spilled out into the open. Lord Black ushered him in, shouting back over his shoulder, “Shut up, old harridan! Look who's here.”

A little wary, and extending his senses into the house, Marvolo stepped over the threshold and into the entrance hall. He followed Lord Black – who was wearing an ugly sneer – over to a big portrait of a woman he knew. Or had known. As far as he was aware, Walburga Black had been dead a number of years already.

“Who have you brought here, you traitor of a son! Another blood-traitor, half-breed, or mudblood?” Charming as ever, Walburga Black, now Marvolo remembered why he had avoided parties organized by her, even with declining mental health.

“No, mother, Lord Slytherin is here. So shut up, so we can work in peace.” The last Black’s disdain for his mother was all too clear in his voice, and Marvolo asked himself why the portrait was still here.

The man was a Gryffindor, so why not simply ask? Nodding to the stunned witch in the dark portrait flanked by fraying curtains, Marvolo gave Lord Black a questioning look. “Why do you have a disruptive portrait still hanging where guests have to endure it, Lord Black?”

With inner glee Marvolo watched as Walburga registered his face and voice – and the title he had used to address her son, whom she had tried to throw out of the family – eyes getting wide, and if she could have gotten any paler she probably would have.

“Because she attached it with a permanent sticking charm to the wall, Lord Slytherin.” Marvolo saw the spark of glee caused by mocking his mother in the other man’s pale eyes.

“I could recommend an artist. I’m sure I read somewhere that there are special spells to charm animated portraits silent, or even inanimate if needed. But it was a long time ago, so I do not really remember where I read it. But I know several artists who are skilled enough to work on complex portraits,” Marvolo offered. He had read anything he had got his hands on, including books on the obscure art of wizarding portraits.

“My Lord, is that you? Has my son found the way back onto the right path?” Now Walburga was simpering, fluttering her lashes at Marvolo – reminding him of Bellatrix – and Marvolo found himself sharing an eye-roll with Lord Black.
“If you ask if I am the man that used to be known as ‘The Dark Lord’ or ‘Lord Voldemort’ then you are right.” He spoke his old and current title with the contempt he had to maintain in public – and Lord Black counted as public – before a smirk broke through his mask. “But I’ll have you know that my father was a Muggle. So… you probably would call me a... now what was it? ...a half-breed?”

A chuckling Marvolo followed the rapidly blinking Lord Black into the kitchen, while the portrait did not utter another word.

ooOoo

“I know it is hardly protocol to entertain another Lord of the Wizengamot in the kitchen. But this room is one of the cleanest, and here we will be able to get tea and biscuits.” Sirius worked hard to sound polite and a little apologetic while he tried to cope with what had happened out in the hall.

Of course he had known that Tom Marvolo Riddle, the man that had become He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, was indeed a half-blood. Dumbledore had made sure they all knew of the inglorious past of this man. But that he himself would openly admit to it... that was something Sirius never would have expected.

They walked into the kitchen where Remus was sitting at the big table, a cup of tea next to him, reading through a scroll filled with text. Probably one of the copies Harry had sent of his history homework, to get actual feedback on them. Sometimes Sirius wondered if Bins was even reading the homework that the students handed in.

“Do you want a cup of tea, Lord Slytherin?” Sirius asked, indicating one of the chairs for the bastard to sit down in.

“Yes, that would be welcome, Lord Black. Good evening, Mr. Lupin.” That the man was always so damned polite was driving Sirius mad. Remus only looked up, nodded politely in return, and continued to mark the essay.

“Just so you know, I think you want to push Harry to ask for a re-sorting so he will be placed in Slytherin. That a re-sorting is even possible! I always thought it was a myth. All the stories I have heard over the years, each one more outlandish than the next! By the way: the hat agreed that Harry had that possibility. To ask, I mean.” He shut up after that, he was rambling and he knew it. Way to go to actually make a strong position for himself.

Remus had prepared tea for the additions to the table and sat down again. Sirius smiled at his friend, rubbing over his eyes. “I stayed with Harry most of the day. The aurors have not found much so far. They did verify that there was an attack on Harry, so there will be a complete investigation. Professor McGonagall told me that the extra rooms for Harry were finished. He seemed rather collected when I left to come here.”

They lapsed into silence for a moment, sipping on the excellent tea, eating a few biscuits. Slytherin got a bundle of parchment from the inside pocket of his robes, enlarging it back to its proper size and placing it on the table in front of Sirius. “This is the amount of information I could… gather in the time I have had. I will probably be able to provide more in a few weeks, but I thought it would benefit the community more, to have it earlier?” The last came out more like a question, and again Sirius wondered how much was genuine and how much was acted. It was highly frustrating never
really to know for sure.

“Let me have a quick look. But by the sheer size of this stack, I think it should be enough so you can look through this house. Maybe tonight I’ll be able to sleep better again.”

ooOoo

Marvolo watched while Lord Sirius Orion Black looked through the information he had compiled. It had been quite distasteful to realize how many witches and wizards had died while he had lost his mind to madness. How many children could have been born with magic if he had found another way? As he had done while writing the information down, Marvolo pushed the thoughts out of his mind. No sense in crying over spilled milk.

His head tilted to the side, brown wavy hair brushing against his shoulders, Marvolo listened to the magic he could feel in the house. There were many dark objects scattered throughout the rooms. The wards were quite extensive and soundly build. Breaking into this house, when someone was defending it, would take great amounts of both time and power. But the Blacks had always been a little paranoid. So the smaller wards inside the house, around several rooms, came as no surprise. Beside the one on the small cupboard next to the storage room. It did not feel familiar to anything Marvolo knew, but was powerful. Maybe house-elf magic? He had made the error of underestimating their magic once before, he tried to not repeat errors too often.

While they were so occupied – Lupin working on an essay, Black looking through the information, Marvolo feeling the place out – the door to the kitchen opened and an old wrinkled house-elf waddled into the kitchen, muttering under its breath. Could it be that this was the elf he had borrowed from Regulus? To his own chagrin – it would have come in handy to know now – Marvolo had to admit that he never did pay much attention to the elves. So he could not be sure, he did not even remember the name of that elf he had used to test the protection in the cave.

Blue-glamoured eyes followed the elf on its way across the kitchen and to the warded space Marvolo had noticed moments before. The moment the little door was opened, Marvolo felt the presence of one of his horcruxes. There was a piece of his soul hidden in what looked like the sleeping place of a house-elf. A part of him wanted to scoff at the place, the circumstances. Another part reminded him that another horcrux was hidden amongst the rubbish in that room he had found on the seventh floor. Even though that was at Hogwarts, it was not much better.

Should he mention that he had located the object, or should he wait for Lord Black to grant him permission to search, before he stumbled upon it by accident?

It became a moot point in that moment. “That's more information than I thought you could have assembled by now. Should we start searching?” Black interrupted his thoughts.

Marvolo nodded, emptied his tea cup and stood. “Maybe we should start in the kitchen, as we are already here?”

Half an hour later Marvolo left the house, Salazar Slytherin’s locket hanging safely around his neck, tucked into his shirt. At least he had managed to retrieve one of them. The diary and the ring had been destroyed, forced to reunite with the rest of his soul, residing in his body. The locket was now safe, as was the small splinter in Henry. Now he needed to get the cup out of Gringotts and the diadem out of Hogwarts and he could sleep a little better. He really did not want to feel a forced
reconnection again.

oooOOooo

“I’ve got the boat ready.” Jeff, one of several men around a table covered in old stains, said, smiling smugly.

“Is it big enough? And what makes it move?” the biggest of the others said, crushing his cigarette in a pile of old ash and stubs.

“It’s big enough for us and our friends. And it has more than one way to move. We can row, set the sails or use the… motor? …attached to it.” Jeff looked a little unsure if he had the pronunciation right and took a sip from his beer.

“It’s autumn now.” The youngest and only lanky wizard commented and waved his wand, muttering a spell under his breath, opening a new bottle and taking a sip.

“And?” the instigator of this endeavour asked a little impatiently.

“It’s the season of storms, is all I want to say.”

Jeff waved his own beer through the air. “The Muggle in that marina – where the boat is – promised to have an eye on the weather and tell me when the time is best for a fishing trip.” He shrugged to the confused looks on the other conspirator’s faces. “That’s the story I told him. I want to go fishing with a few friends of mine.”

“All right,” the big red-faced wizard nodded. “So we have a boat, no problem with the weather. We need clothes for our friends -- can’t have them walk around in Azkaban robes -- we should take them something to eat, and potions. Fingers, can you get some?”

The solidly built man standing next to the cool box nodded. “If I have time till the start of next week. Sure.”

Most of the plan was in place. They knew who they wanted to come along to the prison, where to hide their friends till they were better, had a few wands found for them. This was a session to clear up a few last points. When to start the plan – as the youngster had pointed out, the weather was important in that – what they needed to take, alternatives when something went wrong… Up till now, nothing indicated that the Dementors would be put in charge again anytime soon.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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“Spill,” was the quiet command issued to Sirius the moment he was alone with his childhood friend and companion. They had had no time for a talk before Lord Slytherin had shown up at the door. So now Remus demanded a more thorough explanation.

Sitting down, sighing wearily, Sirius cast a spell to fill a cup with tea and float it over to his place. “You have read Harry’s letter?” Serious grey eyes regarded his friend, who rolled the parchment he had been working on into a scroll and placed it to the side, nodding.

“Well I went to Griffin House – but you probably heard that – I met with Lord Slytherin, who had been researching the whole night to find some way to make sure Harry is safe. He offered me breakfast and went to shower and change while I waited. After that we went over to Hogwarts. The research uncovered two bylaws. One has already be used. And if the other will be called is Harry’s decision.”

Sirius made a pause to take a few sips from his tea and to contemplate. It had been rather a different experience to walk at the side of the man who most likely still was the Dark Lord. The animagus still remembered the reverence with which his parents had spoken about the man. And now they had been seen by the whole staff of Hogwarts, a few aurors, and even quite a few students walking side by side, working for a common goal. But as the common goal was Harry’s safety, it felt all right.

“There was an attack, but you heard that already. The investigation is in full force. But most interesting are the bylaws that Slytherin found. Harry will get his own rooms in Gryffindor Tower – probably tomorrow – and can ask for a re-sort if he wants to.” Shaking his head in incredulity, Sirius took another sip from his tea.

“Re-sorting is truly possible?” Remus asked wide eyed, “I heard you talk about that earlier, but… the stories that are told just sound so… outlandish. And no history text ever mentions something like that.”

And so Sirius started to recount the stories the man from the board had told them today in the staff room. And then he proceeded to tell Remus all the details about his day spent in the hospital wing sitting by Harry’s bed. He pulled a sheet of thick drawing paper from the inside of his robes, showing off the charcoal drawing of himself as Padfoot, already contemplating where he could place it on a wall to the best possible effect.

When both the dog animagus and the werewolf went to bed that night, the wall in the kitchen had a new picture hanging between the door to the pantry and one of the cabinets.

Harry had made it almost too late to breakfast on Saturday morning. He now walked together with Ron and Hermione, both carrying a few of his belongings, up the stairs leading to the boys' dorms in Gryffindor Tower. After a day spent in the infirmary – even if Sirius had spend the day with
him, listening to stories Harry wanted to tell, and telling stories of his own – it was nice to be with his friends again.

“And then finally the aurors made their way into the common room. They wanted to know where each of us had been. I think they went to all the common rooms. So much work! And Auror Proudfoot was a little surprised that we had already collected the places where everyone had been. He's heading the investigation. I hope there are books about magical forensics in the library. I never even thought about the way the auror department would go about investigating a crime!” Hermione prattled on and on. Harry smiled at that, Hermione's enthusiasm was as reliable as the sun. A nice constant in a world where nothing seemed to be sure at all.

They finally passed the door to the room of Head Boy – only ever in use if the year’s Head Boy was a Gryffindor – and started on the last set of stairs up to what probably could be called the attic of the tower.

“Wow, mate!” Ron commented once they had crossed the threshold and Hermione shut up to take a good look around.

The room was mostly circular – the bathroom probably hidden behind the only straight wall – and divided by several curtains, which were open at the moment. Red and gold was the main colour scheme, like in all other parts of the tower. There was a big bed, with curtains, a canopy, and comforter, a desk with a chair and several bookcases, and a seating area with a big couch, cushions to sit on the floor, and several thick rugs.

It was lovely.

The windows, set in all directions providing a good look out on the grounds and onto the school – her courtyards, the other towers, and the roofs – let in a lot of light. The ceiling was covered in light wood and sloped down from a single high point in the middle, to the walls.

“I would rather be sleeping in our dorm and forego the murder attempts. Thank you very much,” Harry drawled sarcastically. He really would rather sleep in the dorm as he had for the last four years. But it just was not safe anymore.

Ron looked sheepish and placed the things he was carrying on the desk. “You're right, Harry. But these rooms are pretty awesome!”

Turning slowly around his own axis, Harry had to admit that Ron was right. “They are. We'll probably be able to study in quiet here.” The green-eyed teen gave his best friends an impish smile. Hermione was beaming at the concept of a quiet place to study that was not the library. and Ron glowered because Harry had used the dreaded word – study – in front of Hermione.

They started to place the things Harry owned around the room, while Hermione continued talking about the investigation.

“I heard that they discounted all of the first-years and probably also the second-years. They can’t cast a stunner. Do you know if the attackers were big or small? Tall? Short?”

Harry laughed incredulously. “Hermione, stop! I have given a copy of my memory to the aurors, they will see for themselves. I don't really remember. Concentrated on staying on my broom, evading the stunners. Didn't really have the time to look at them more closely. Why don’t we talk about something else?”

Of course they didn't stay away from the investigation. But Harry did not contribute much to the
discussion. So it was Hermione and Ron who speculated about what was to happen, what spells there were to secure evidence. Soon Hermione was appalled at how little real evidence-gathering there was happening in wizarding crime-fighting.

While his friends were comparing the differences in law enforcement between the wizarding and Muggle worlds, Harry was deep in thought. What should he do? He was fairly certain that at least one of his attackers was a Gryffindor. Only a Gryffindor could have managed to place the potion in his food, only a Gryffindor could have charmed his things green. And he didn't believe that there were just several people doing this, unrelated. It felt too much like escalating to him.

And thinking back at the reactions and what had been said, he was fairly sure that McLaggen was somehow involved. Harry did not dare tell that to anyone, though. If he did, it would get back to his guardian. And somehow he had no doubts that the man would react violently in some way. As much as he had been kind and even somewhat caring, he still had his dark red eyes, had split his soul, was still only running on parts of it. Even though it was more than half a soul by now.

No, he did not feel comfortable bringing anyone to the attention of Lord Voldemort. Even someone who had tried to kill him.

And it had been several. More than one. Probably at least three students. Because he now thought that he remembered that there had been two people casting stunners and he had got them both. So there had to have been at least one more, to wake them up again so they could get away before the professors arrived there.

And then there still was the question about whether he should ask for a re-evaluation of his placement. He had walked to Slytherin the evening of the attack. Because he had not felt safe with his Gryffindor housemates. This was one of the deciding factors for even being able to ask to be re-sorted. Or so Sirius had told him. What would happen if he asked and set the Hat on his head again?

Would he remain in Gryffindor? Harry thought it possible. He still was fairly brave and brash. And if he asked and was placed in his current house again, what then? It would only increase the resentment his Housemates already felt for him. For his desire to leave, only to stay. Others might see it as a confirmation that he was in the right place. But the other Gryffindors probably would only see that he wanted to leave. He could maybe present it as a dare...

And right there was the proof that he could be in Slytherin. Ever since he had been adopted, his political, cunning mind had been schooled. The part of him that had been active to keep him relatively safe at the Dursleys and had mostly slept since he had come to Hogwarts, was active once again. In Slytherin he would be with Theo and Daphne, Draco… it would not be all bad. He smirked. Never again would he have to remember the password for the common room.

Harry was fairly sure that Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were not options for him. He had adopted better study habits, but still did not really crave knowledge for the sake of knowledge. And loyalty was surely part of him, but smaller than his urges to run into a situation to save others, or his pondering over different outcomes, like he was doing right now.

Placing the communication mirror Sirius had given to him yesterday on the small table near his bed, Harry searched the wall for the tapestry that controlled the wards on his new rooms. He could use runes to decide how harsh the wards would be, write down the names of people he would allow in there.

While Hermione arranged his school books after some pattern only she would deem useful, and
Ron was watching the grounds, laughing about how tiny all the students looked from up here, Harry set the wards. Only Hermione and Ron – and of course the professors – would even be able to walk the stairs up to his door. And no one would be able to enter when he was not there. He just felt safer that way. Considering that safety was the whole purpose of this, it probably was best to err on the side of caution.

oooOOooo

It was Saturday, but they both were still here among heaps of parchment, trying to bring order into the chaos. They had amassed a lot of overtime on this assignment.

Kingsley looked up from the parchment he held in his hands. A stack of order forms for supplies from Scrivenshaft's. Quills and ink. Not for the first time he wondered who had been so daft as to place all paperwork in the same room. Or make it a rule that all paperwork had to be kept for this long. One of the order forms was older than a hundred years.

On the other side of the room, standing knee-deep in files, was his partner in this assignment. Dawlish.

Even after all the time they had been sorting and searching, he still did not know what to think about him. But it proved to be hard to keep up the constant vigilance Alastor always harped about.

“I still don’t know what I did wrong to be given this assignment. It feels more like a detention with Filch than anything else,” the dark-skinned wizard said into the room, breaking the silence.

A snort from across the chaos was the first reaction, before Dawlish straightened up, stretching out his back. “Had many of those, Shacklebolt?” the brown-haired wizard asked, laughter in his voice. As he continued he got serious really quick. “We search for evidence of who sent Dementors after three heirs and their tutor. I consider it an honour to have this assignment.”

And there it was again. The hint that this man might be a Death Eater. An honour to be investigating the attack on Heir Slytherin and the sons of two men that had been Death Eaters. Only free on a technicality and money.

Kingsley stretched his own back. “I just wished we could sort these,” he waved his arm over the mess, “a little more efficiently than by hand.”

Dawlish nodded easily agreeing. “But with all these charms to make sure they can’t be stolen easily… Maybe we can get permission to remove the charms, sort with magic, and be finished faster?”

For a brief moment there was a flicker of hope in Kingsley, before the reality of pedantic bureaucrats hit him hard. They tended to make all things as complicated as possible. “I think before we managed to get the permission we would be finished with sorting.”

They both rolled their eyes and bent down again to sort through another patch of tangled parchment.

The way all their paperwork needed to be filled out three times or more… sometimes Kingsley thought the true evil in the world were the bureaucrats.
All forms needed to be filled out multiple times… slowly brown eyes widened, and the tall auror straightened himself up again. It was almost impossible that an order to send Dementors somewhere needed only to be filled out once. Where might the other copies be stored?

“What are you thinking?” Dawlish asked, slowly making his way through the small paths they had cleared in the first few days on this job.

Sounding deep in thought and kind of far away Kingsley answered. “The last report I wrote, I copied it three times. The original went to Scrimgeour, one I kept, one probably is somewhere in this mess, and the last one went to the solicitor involved. Do you know how many copies are needed for a Kiss order?”

Swearing something under his breath, Dawlish walked a little faster. Blinking in surprise, Kingsley realized that the man had paled a few shades. How curious.

“You're right! There certainly is more than one copy! Why didn’t I think about this earlier? We could have known weeks ago!” The man seemed distressed, and Kingsley raised an eyebrow. Maybe the other really was a Death Eater. Judging by the stories that had been told after the trials of the first war, displeasing the man at the top was not something you would wish to do.

“Keep calm, Dawlish. If it was this obvious, like it feels now, someone would have thought about it before today. And we still need to find where the other copy might be stored.” He clasped his hand on the other’s shoulder.

Dawlish took a deep breath and nodded, getting his wits back. “Whoever it was, they probably didn’t hold onto a copy. But the Dementors are at Azkaban… Is there an archive there?”

Kingsley nodded enthusiastically, a grin spreading over his face, answered by a matching one on the face of the other man. “It should be. And with the Dementors moved to the other end of the island, it shouldn’t be too unpleasant to go there to check.”

“We probably should keep it quiet until we've done so,” cautioned Dawlish, and Kingsley nodded, continuing his sorting. “Can’t risk the perpetrator getting wind of our plan. How can we manage to get the portkeys we would need without causing suspicion?”

They started to plan their way to the island prison to check on the records there and at the same time make sure that no one got to know about it before they had finished their little excursion.

Later the same day Albus sat behind his desk in his office, Fawkes sitting on his perch preening his feathers, a newspaper and a letter in front of the old Headmaster, a frown on his face.

Alastor had been right in his assessment of the situation. The Prophet had published a piece about the attack on Harry, making Tom out to be a caring and friendly guardian, ensuring that his son would get all the protection he could possibly need. The public loved the tragic story Tom had planted and which had blossomed beautifully.

Never would Albus have thought that Tom would allow this much of his past to be paraded in the open. That he had given information about people that had vanished in the past war to the DMLE… it seemed that Albus had miscalculated.
The letter that had arrived with the post around lunchtime only drove the point deeper. Tom had arranged for a standing appointment with the goblins. Whenever they both made an appearance there – at the same time – they would have a room to use and one of the Gringotts’ curse-breakers at hand. The letter proposed that they meet Monday in the early evening in front of the bank and remove the curse on that occasion. Tom even invited him to bring two people to keep him company.

Rubbing his eyes behind his glasses, Albus conceded that he had grossly miscalculated. Tom seemed to be much better off than before his fall. He needed to take another approach. Most of all, he needed to reassure the Order that Tom really was evil. Now that the boy could act as well as, if not better than, he had as a teenager, it was not as obvious as before. But Albus was sure of it.

Tom was evil, had already been on his path to true evil when he had been a boy of eleven.

No one not evil could split his own soul. And the Headmaster knew that Tom had done exactly that. Split his soul. More than once. He would have to tell the others. Make sure that they all saw Tom as the evil man he was and not the caring, contrite young man struck by tragic circumstances he portrayed himself as.

He would have to tell the Order about the horcruxes and his suspicion that Harry was one as well. The need to destroy all of the dark objects so Tom Riddle was mortal once more. The fact that Harry would have to die, and his hope that the boy could live if Riddle himself would cast the curse. If Harry sacrificed himself willingly.

He had no illusions how this would go. Molly would be furious… no need to dwell on it now. He was tired and needed to go to sleep. Having the aurors on school grounds was not easy. Why had everything become so complicated? Was he getting too old for this? No, that was not really a possibility.

Sighing to himself, Albus rose, patted his familiar on the head and walked up to his quarters. Time to take his potions – provided by Severus to combat the curse – and then sleep. Tomorrow would be another day, and he would get the undivided support of the Order of the Phoenix once more. He just had to!

oooOOooo

Tonks took the last of her things out of her locker and waved cheerily to her fellow aurors on her way out of the locker-room. Whistling, she walked to the public Floos in the Atrium, shuffling into one of the lines behind an old wizard in dove grey robes.

Kingsley had told her in the evening the day before, as she had come in for her shift, that this morning there would be a full Order meeting. So her plan was to go home, change into something more comfortable, and then go over to Headquarters.

She was curious what this was about. Since she had started on this undercover assignment – or what was named an undercover assignment, waylaying shoplifters in Diagon – she was a little out of the loop.

Not an hour later she stepped through the door into the old house in Godric's Hollow. Remembering that the umbrella stand had been on the right the last time she had been here, she
turned left and promptly fell over the old thing.

Swearing under her breath, Tonks struggled back to her feet, shrinking her hair shorter to get it out of her eyes.

Why did they move the damn thing every bloody time?

“Are you unharmed, Nymphadora?” suddenly the Headmaster was by her side and steadied her while she got her feet back under herself.

“I’m fine! That thing is always standing somewhere else.” With a sheepish smile she righted herself and followed the others back into the dining room.

Almost all of the Order had already arrived. Molly was distributing some of her baked goods – muffins and cinnamon buns – and several conversations were being held around the room.

Tonks sat down near the door.

Snape was standing in a dark corner, as he usually did, Bill sat next to his father, the Headmaster sat down at the head of the table. The rest were scattered around the table without any order she could see.

It took a few minutes, but finally they were all sitting around the table, each of them with a warm drink – tea or coffee – and a delicious little pastry before them. There was a curious tension in the room. On the one side the anxious cheerfulness of Molly and on the other side the dark brooding of Moody and the Headmaster.

Leaning back in her chair, Tonks sipped her coffee and let her gaze wander over the assembly. Remus looked good, much better now than only two months before, and the same could be said about Snape. Something that just did not sit not right with her. Should spying not leave some mark on a man? She would have thought that it was a stressful position and would leave a man looking exhausted. But on the other hand, he was a Potions Master, and there always were glamour.

Before she could follow this trail deeper into her mind, the Headmaster stood from his chair and raised his hands, instantly gaining the attention of all members present.

“Thank you all for coming. I will try to be brief so that you all can go back to your normal Sunday activities.” He smiled benevolently, and then his face morphed from his usual smile to a sad frown.

“Tomorrow I will go to a meeting with Lord Slytherin, to accept his help to remove the curse on my hand. I want to ask two of you to accompany me.” With twinkling blue eyes he waited a moment. Bill and Mad Eye held up their hands to signal their willingness to play escort, the Headmaster nodded and turned even more serious.

His blackened hand vanished in the big sleeve of the other arm, producing a damaged little black book and a chunky golden ring set with a heavy stone, and he placed both objects on the table in front of himself. All eyes followed the two objects. What were they? And why were they so important that they all were called for a meeting?

“The day this,” the Headmaster laid his healthy hand onto the small book with the big hole in the middle, “was brought to me by Harry, a big question I could not solve before suddenly found its solution. You see, I always was sure that Tom was not dead. But I never was sure how he had managed to survive. And with this and the boy’s description, I knew the answer to this particular riddle.” He smiled over his own joke, but Tonks could only roll her eyes.
They all had been told who the man later known by his chosen moniker, and now called by the more or less amusing no-names, had been. But to make a joke on the man’s last name in a moment like this… even Tonks felt it was a little too much. Judging by Alastor Moody’s frown and the dark glimmer in the dark eyes in Snape’s face, neither of them appreciated the joke either.

“I didn’t plan to share the revelation of that day with anyone. I fear what this information might do to you. But considering the way Tom is acting in public and the publics reaction to the stories he is telling, I fear even more what he might manage to do when his true evil is not known.”

Now Tonks fidgeted in her chair, shredding her muffin to small crumbs. She had no good feeling about this.

“There is a magic – the most evil one existing – that can be used to split a human soul. A piece then can be stored outside the body, creating a tether that will keep the soul earth-bound should the body be killed. One such object is called a horcrux. And both these objects – the diary and the ring – were horcruxes.”

The room was quiet. No one said a word, while Tonks tried to wrap her head around the little information they had been given so far. Splitting a soul? That did sound rather preposterous.

“I first stumbled over this in an old book I read. It contained most of the information needed to complete the magic. I will only say this: to split the soul, one has to murder another human in cold blood. And Tom did it not only once, or twice – as theses objects suggest – no. I believe he aimed to create a total of seven pieces.”

The reaction to this was loud. Many of the Order members demanded clarification in loud voices, stood from their chairs to make wide sweeping gestures. Tonks was too stunned to make as much of a ruckus as the rest. Split a soul? Who would be so insane to do such a thing to themselves?

It took almost an hour before they were calm enough to settle down again. The other aurors and Snape were all looking grim. The relentless questioning had brought a few other facts to light. For one, that it was almost impossible to destroy the containers, but that this was needed to make the man mortal once more. Basilisk Venom was one of the few things able to destroy them and had been used on the diary – in form of a fang from the overgrown snake – and the ring.

Now they were sitting around the table, new drinks at hand, and were silently waiting for the Headmaster to continue. Because somehow Tonks could not believe that this had been all. Not that it was something to be disregarded – what they had been told was bad enough – but the face the old man was putting on indicated there was more to come.

“Sadly, I have one more revelation to make.” A cold shiver ran down Tonks’ back. “You all know of Harry’s ability to talk to snakes, the way his scar reacts to proximity to Voldemort.” The old man’s sigh made Tonks’ sense of dread spike. “I believe that Tom had destabilized his soul to the point that it fell apart when he attacked the Potters. One piece did not flee with the rest, but attached itself to the only living thing in the whole house.”

The silence that followed after that was only broken when Molly stood, her eyes wide, staring at the Headmaster. Her voice was low and menacing. “You want to tell me that for You-Know-Who to die, Harry would have to die too?”

After that Tonks didn’t manage to register much. She tried to comprehend what the old man had said between the lines. A horcrux kept a soul bound to this plane. To make someone able to die who had even one of those vile things, they all needed to be destroyed. To do so, the container had to be damaged beyond repair. Harry was one of those blasted things. Damaging a human beyond
repair was a pretty way to say you had to kill him.

Was the old man telling them seriously they would have to kill Harry if they planned to kill Voldemort?

 ooOoo

Severus felt faint.

The information was entirely new for him. Horcruxes… he had known that the Dark Lord had gone far on the way to immortality. But this… this was a level he had not considered before. He listened on reflex to the other things the Headmaster told them. Something about his hope that the child might survive the removal of the soul piece if the Dark Lord himself would cast a killing curse at the boy. Again.

As Severus knew that there was an unbreakable vow in place that would prevent such a thing from happening, he felt the suspicion rise that should the Headmaster learn that his scenario never would come to pass, he would fall back on destroying the horcruxes all by himself. Including the one located in one of their students.

He watched Molly Weasley shouting so long that her voice was going raspy, watched the calculating looks from Moody, the pale face of Lupin, and then he had to leave. His Lord was summoning him. He stood, caught the eyes of the Headmaster, and left.

He wondered what this day would still bring. If only once, it would be nice to not stumble over some new complication at every turn.

 ooOooOoo

Late on Sunday Marvolo sat in one of the parlours of the House that once had been a wedding present for Dorea Black and now was his Headquarters. He had transfigured a few smaller tables into one big oval-shaped one, and the plush love-seats into single leather chairs. A few touches to the décor – flowers just didn’t cut it – and he had a new meeting room.

While he waited for his inner circle to answer his summons, he made himself another cup of sweet tea and took one more of the little cakes the elves had prepared. They had not taken long to realize he loved to eat sweets. After a childhood of missing out on good food and sweets of any kind, he now indulged himself.

Barty naturally was the first to arrive, as he had been down in the office trying to get all the invitations to small get-togethers sorted out. Marvolo hoped that he would not be able to attend all of them. All the families of higher social standing with unattached adult daughters had managed to invite him. It was a slightly frightening prospect to be chased by matchmaking mothers.

 Those maudlin thoughts were banished from his mind as he heard steps in the hall leading up to the door.
One after the other the rest of his inner circle – Lucius, Xerxes, both Greengrasses, Severus, Benjamin, and the Carrow twins – came in, kneeled down, and then took their places at the table. Each of them was clad in the dark robes and had brought their masks. The masks were placed on the table almost without sound. Soon they all prepared their cups of tea to their liking, taking cakes and relaxing. Marvolo watched them with amusement. It was obvious which of them had been in contact with him the most. Severus and Xerxes were the most relaxed, the Carrows were the most nervous.

Marvolo nodded to Lucius, who was sitting on his right, and the blond aristocrat started on his report. He talked mostly about the meetings he had been at, talking about the moods and shifts he had felt in the Wizengamot members and the Ministry Department Heads. It seemed that his efforts to gain support for his campaign to change the laws regarding werewolves were going well.

Next in line was Severus, who emptied his tea cup before he started on his report. Marvolo finished off another small cake and focused his whole attention on Severus’ smooth voice.

“Earlier today the Order met in full. The Headmaster reported that he would accept your help, my Lord, in removing the curse on his hand. He asked for volunteers to accompany him. Alastor Moody and William Weasley will be there with him. After that, he told some things he had been keeping to himself for a long time to all that were there. The reaction was varied and violent. The long-term effects of this revelation on the Order are unclear.”

Marvolo raised a brow. That was ominous. Severus was pale and obviously reluctant to talk about details. Red eyes met with dark ones and a clear picture was projected into his mind. Severus kneeling before him, giving a report without any audience. Curious why the man was so reluctant to speak about whatever had been the topic at the order meeting, Marvolo send a picture of Severus talking and his face with a stern expression. The next thing the Dark Lord saw was a memory of Dumbledore as he spoke the word “Horcrux” and showed a little black book with an enormous hole in its middle.

Suddenly Marvolo’s stomach felt like a leaden weight had been dropped into it from a considerable height. Why had Dumbledore decided to talk about this? Clamping down on something he did not want to acknowledge but that felt suspiciously like panic, Marvolo reminded himself that he had been the one prying, and that Severus had known enough to ask for privacy to report.

He reflected the image of a kneeling Severus giving a report back at the man, prompting him to move on to the next topic. All this had happened in the blink of an eye. It was a nifty way to communicate.

Taking deep even breaths – he had known that Dumbledore knew about his horcruxes, no need to panic now – Marvolo listened to the other part of Severus’ report. “The aurors have decided to not consider the first- and second-years as possible culprits. They are now sure that only residents of the castle were involved, as no one crossed the wards in the relevant time. The copy of the memory your son provided, my Lord, was examined carefully and the number of attackers was determined, with three attackers casting stunners. As your heir managed to drop all three, the aurors assume that there were at least four people present. So far there are no obvious suspects, but they keep searching.” Severus took a moment to fill his cup again, before he continued.

“I have reviewed my memory of breakfast the morning your son was poisoned, my Lord, and suspect that Cormac McLaggen – a Gryffindor sixth-year – was the one to place the potion in Heir Slytherin’s goblet. Considering that there was a distraction staged at the other end of the table, I have a few more suspects likely involved in the scheme.”

“Give their names to Benjamin,” Marvolo said decisively, glad that there was some progress in this
matter that he could focus on. He turned his head so he was looking at Lord Nott. “Get me whatever information you can on the students themselves and their families. Once there is more evidence, I want us to be ready to strike at them.” Accepting his order, Benjamin inclined his head in a respectful half-bow.

“I wanted to thank you, my Lord, for providing the Pensieve. Without it, finding this information would have been considerably harder.” Severus bowed in his chair with practiced elegance, indicating that he had finished his report as far as he could give it in front of the others.

The reports moved around the room until the Carrows were next. After they had spoken about the rumours going around in the shadier parts of magical Britain, Alecto gathered all her courage to ask a question she had obviously chewed on for quite a while. “My Lord, not that I would presume to intrude, but why are you not doing anything against Dumbledore? He broke into a place you had under wards, so I guess you could file at least a complaint with the aurors, or even press charges?” The witch looked decidedly pale under her fiery-red hair, her face a mask, hiding her nervousness.

With all that had come to light so far, the amusement at her nervousness at questioning her Lord felt subdued. But it was a valid question that deserved an answer, if only to defuse rumours. “You are right up to a point, Alecto. But as the place I had warded is not mine, and most of the wards I used are not legal, I would rather not draw any attention to the place.” He placed a smirk on his face. “The Ministry is not really bright and is willing to accept almost anything that will preserve their view of the world. But even they would get suspicious once they noticed the wards and curses on the place were placed there while I still was in school.” He laughed and the others followed his invitation to laugh at his dig at the Ministry. “Dumbledore is even now suffering for his error, and his reputation has suffered even more.”

Considering the matter closed, Marvolo turned his head to Xerxes, who started to recount his progress with the school. Listening with as much focus as he could manage, Marvolo had to concede that he was affected much more than he would have thought possible by the fact that the whole of the Order of the Phoenix now knew of his horcruxes. He resolved to not think about this until he had all the facts from Severus.

At least it seemed that the school was making good progress. The caretakers for the children had moved into their rooms, and the first two young orphans had moved in. Xerxes and London were visiting eligible muggle-born children and had managed to collect quite a number of students already. Next his old friend planned to get a bus enchanted to act like the Knight Bus, only to collect the students in the morning and take them home after lessons were out for the day.

The rest of the meeting went by in a blur. He felt unbalanced and checked his Occlumency shields. But the cause for his tumultuous feelings was not bleed-over from his son. Maybe all this ease with appearing human, projecting feelings, was not at all his ability to act getting better. Maybe he actually was regaining more feelings than he had been aware of. But now was not the time to ponder it.

With a good plan of action and orders for all of them, Marvolo sent them away, back home to their families. Only Severus stayed behind.

ooOoo

Still shaken from the revelations of this day, Severus did as he had in the picture he had projected
into his Lord’s mind: he knelt down on the floor. Waiting for his Lord to ask for the details of the Order meeting.

“Get up from the floor, Severus,” his Lord said, not sounding half as angry as Severus had expected. “This report demands a glass of firewhiskey.” Slowly the Potions Master did as he was ordered and got up, following his Lord to his study in this house.

Soon they were sitting on opposite sides of the desk, each with a tumbler of old firewhiskey before them.

“Ask, Severus, or talk, whatever it is you need to do. You look shaken.” His Lord sounded remarkably shaken himself, and the fact that Severus was even able to hear it unsettled him deeply.

“The Headmaster talked about Horcruxes. Explained what they are in general terms. He called them the most evil magic in existence. And he claimed that you, my Lord, made several.” Severus had to swallow. He had just relaxed a little around the Dark Lord, and now he suddenly knew how the man had managed not to die the night Lily’s life had been ended. Talking about splitting souls with a man who had done it – repeatedly – felt dangerous and reckless.

As Severus saw the man nodding, and taking a sip from his drink, he felt the last of his blood leaving his face.

“I did,” he sighed “One of my bigger mistakes.”

Severus took a sip from his tumbler and tried to comprehend the mood the man across from him was in.

“Can you give me the details of what the old man knows?”

Severus nodded and tried to recount the information as concisely as he could manage.

“Dumbledore had an old diary and a ring. He claimed that they had been… and had been destroyed. The diary by… Potter. The ring by Dumbledore himself a few weeks ago.”

The Dark Lord nodded, his blood-red eyes fixed on the tumbler he was spinning between his fingers. “That sounds accurate. The diary was the first I created. Henry destroyed it when he killed the basilisk. The ring – my second – being destroyed caused my collapse at the meeting concerning Xerxes’ school project. Has he said anything else?”

Severus nodded. How long would this mood hold? What would happen when the mood broke? Old memories of punishments meted out by the man now sitting in his chair behind the carved desk rose in Severus’ mind. He raised his Occlumency shields higher, taking measured, even breaths.

“He suspects that you planned to create seven of those objects. And that… Lily’s son is one. Created accidentally that night back in ‘81.” Nervously Severus swallowed and asked the question that had preyed on his mind the whole day. “Please tell me that is not possible, my Lord. I beg of you.”

“Be calm Severus. You were here when I made the Unbreakable Vow not to harm him.” That did not sound like Dumbledore’s suspicion was wrong.

“Surely it can’t be, my Lord.” Inwardly Severus cringed at his pleading tone, but he did not really care. He had made a Vow to protect the boy, and now there was another complication. From all he had learned today, the Headmaster would try to kill the child, to get rid of the Dark Lord. He seemed to be willing to do whatever it took to reach the image of the greater good he was so obsessed with.
“I’m currently researching ways to remove that piece of soul from my son without harming him. This piece and the connection it has forged is also the reason you are teaching him Occlumency. I trust that you will be able to shield my son from attacks by the Headmaster and his order?”

“Yes, my Lord. If necessary, I will shield him with my life.”

After a long assessing look, the Dark Lord nodded and then asked, “You will make a wand-oath to not speak of my Horcruxes to anyone who does not already know, and never share more information than the person is aware of, with the obvious exception of myself.”

Severus got his wand out, held it on his flat palm and swore the oath his Lord demanded. His head was spinning. Once he was back in his quarters he would have to meditate to get some semblance of order back into his thoughts.

On his way out of the office, Severus felt the need to ask one last question, even if it came out more like a statement. “You actually care for him, don’t you my Lord?”

“Do I, Severus?” contemplative red eyes rested on the Potions Master, asking if he really had reason to ask… or rather, state, such a thing.

Severus thought over all interactions between his Lord and the boy he had witnessed, and over the reactions of the Dark Lord to different pieces of information regarding his adopted son. He nodded slowly, his hair whipping with the motion. “By all I have seen, you do, my Lord.”

Before the man could ask for more of an explanation, or protest against Severus’ assessment, the dark-haired man turned back to the exit and left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

Severus had known that the moment the Dark Lord came back, his life would get complicated. But he never, ever would have guessed what level of complicated it could reach. Dumbledore suddenly the villain, the Dark Lord trying to protect the child he had tried to murder, Severus caught between the different parties and dragged in both directions at once. And along the way, he was trying to find a woman to marry.

Shaking his head in wonder, Severus walked out of the building and apparated back to Hogwarts. He planned to take a long, warm bath and then meditate to find some calm.

oooOOooo

Many people were deep in thought this evening. All of them were thinking about what the Headmaster of Hogwarts had revealed to his Order of the Phoenix. They all felt it was a pivotal moment in the struggle between the opposing sides.

ooOoo

Severus started his evening with a long hot bath and meditating to get his mind back into some
kind of order. A little later he sat down at his desk in his quarters, writing a letter to Sonja. He
wanted to ask her out for a visit to the theater or opera in London. He never before had taken
advantage of it, but he had the right to take an evening off now and then, and for this he just might.

Hopefully she would agree, because he was starting to develop something akin to feelings for her.
He truly could see himself spending the rest of his life with her, even having children. They shared
so many interests, were both pragmatic… it seemed to be a match that could work.

And it would hopefully take his mind off all the confusing things that were going on beside the
order to increase the numbers of magicals.

ooOoo

Marvolo sat in one of the parlours in Griffin House, sipping on a hot chocolate, a slice of apple
cake by his side, trying to wrap his head around the changes the day had brought. He wondered
how many people now knew about his horcruxes. Dumbledore had told the whole Order, and who
knew how many people they had told by now.

He needed to inform Henry of this change before he learned it from another source. They needed a
quicker way to communicate than by letter. Even as he went to write that letter to his son, Marvolo
thought about ways to speed up their communication.

Maybe some linked notebooks? But no, that might invoke bad memories. The boy had encountered
his diary, after all. He would have to research it. For now it probably would be fastest to send one
of the house-elves with the letter. Or maybe get Severus to come back and deliver it?

ooOoo

After Remus had told Sirius what the Headmaster had told the Order at the meeting on this day,
they stayed silent for a long time. Sirius was pacing up and down, and Remus was sitting on a
chair, listlessly watching his friend wearing the carpet down.

Finally the black-haired wizard spun on his heel so he was facing his friend. With a determined
look in his eyes he started to speak. “I’m not sure what to do, Remus. But I cannot let Harry die.
There has to be another way to get rid of a piece of soul. Will you help me go through the library
here, with a fine-toothed comb, searching for a solution? Possibly even a way to prove the claim?
For all we know, Albus could be wrong!” He threw his hands up in the air, and Remus nodded.

“I will help you search for a solution. I can hardly believe that there even is such a thing as splitting
a soul.”

They were silent for several moments.

“And… please keep an eye on the Headmaster. It might not be kind… but I have a feeling that he
would kill Harry himself, if he thought it was for the good of many more.”

To this a pale Remus only nodded. So much he had thought he knew had been cast in doubt of late,
he had no way to refute the implied accusation that Albus Dumbledore would disregard the individual for the good of the group without so much as a flicker of hesitation.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Thoughts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sunday had been quiet for Harry and his friends. They had spent much of the day in his new rooms, working on their mountain of homework. He had not noticed in the last years, but the fifth year was a hard one. They had to write more, longer, and more complicated essays than ever before.

But the new rooms came in rather handy. Up here they were out of the way of the others and their hostile looks. There were not many, but sadly there was one in every year. From the first-years up to seventh. Harry sighed and cast a simple charm at his History of Magic essay, copying it, before rolling the parchment into a neat scroll.

Maybe he should go to bed. It was late, and tomorrow was another day of lessons. He rolled his eyes. The fact that he had Defence and Potions made Mondays his most disliked day of the whole week. Even if his relationship with Professor Snape had improved over the summer. Thankfully he had dropped Divination. If he had to endure Trelawney on top of Umbridge, he would despair.

As the tired teenager got up from his desk to walk over to his bed – at least as comfortable as the one he had used the last four years – one of the Potter house-elves suddenly appeared in the middle of the room.

The little green being bowed and presented a sealed letter to the young wizard. “Young Master Henry, Master Lord Slytherin sends this letter to you.”

Cautiously, Harry took the few steps to close the gap, getting his wand out from its holster. He remembered vividly the time that Dobby had tried to save his life. No need to take any chances, so he cast the series of detection spells he had learned over the summer. The letter came back clean, so Harry took it from the elf.

“Thank you. You can go back now?” The statement came out more like a question. While he waited for an answer, Harry walked over to the seating area, looking at the seal on the letter.

“Master Lord Slytherin says to wait for answer from young Master Henry,” squeaked the elf.

Not able to say if he wanted to send a response before he had read the letter, Harry sat down on his bed and broke the seal, getting the letter out and opening the parchment. The letter was written in the squiggly lines of Parselscript.

_Dear Henry,_

_I want to make sure that you learn of this from me and not someone not directly connected to the situation._

_Dumbledore saw fit to inform the Order of the Phoenix of the fact that I created horcruxes. I’m not sure how many people now know, but what is the most concerning is the fact that he suspects you might be one too._

_It seems he is planning to hunt them down and destroy them. One of them is back in my possession._
I have started research on how to move the soul-piece out of you without causing you harm, and will keep you up to date as to how my search progresses.

If you ever feel unsafe in the school or threatened by one of the teachers, go to Severus, the Slytherin common room, or the Chamber of Secrets. You should be safe there.

Be assured that the research has priority at the moment.

I think we should find a way to communicate faster than owl-post. So you can alert me if you feel threatened, and I can tell you important information without the risk of it falling into the wrong hands. I’m open to suggestions.

In the hope that you like your new rooms

Marvolo

Flummoxed, Harry blinked, the letter held in both of his hands. The Headmaster knew that he was a horcrux? Was planning on destroying them? Marvolo had not written much, but what he had written was bad enough. And by what Harry knew of those objects, it could get dangerous for him if one of those now in the know decided to get rid of the soul-piece stuck in his head.

With a groan Harry let himself fall back on the bed. Just what he needed, another complication. As if his life was not complicated and dangerous enough already. Now he would have trouble not to look over his shoulder all the time. But maybe that was not so different from the situation before he had read the letter. After all, some of the other Gryffindors had tried to kill him.

He needed to write a short letter in response. Because one obvious solution to the danger he was in was to remove him from Hogwarts. Something he really did not want. His friends were here. This had been his first home. There was no chance he would be happier at another school, or homeschooled. No, he wanted to complete his education here, at Hogwarts.

So he needed to tell Marvolo that he would heed his advice, and felt safe enough now that he had his own rooms.

Fast communication… just as Harry sat back up to move over to his desk to start on the answer, the mirror started to buzz. Green eyes widened – a communication mirror! That was the answer! – and Harry scrambled to answer the call from Sirius.

“Uncle Sirius!” the teen exclaimed once he had the mirror in front of his face, the letter fallen to the floor all but forgotten.

Out of the mirror the serious face of Sirius Black looked up to his godson, eyes taking in the teen's appearance. “How are you, Harry? Room’s good?”

Harry nodded, sobering as he realized that his godfather was worried about something. “I’m fine. No one's tried to kill me today. And the rooms are great!”

“I’m happy that you like your rooms. Listen, Prongslet…” the dark-haired wizard faltered, obviously unsure how to say what he wanted to talk about.

Harry settled down better into the pillows, giving the man time to find the words to tell him what
was on his mind.

“Remus was at a meeting with the Order today, and Dumbledore had something to tell… I don’t know how to do this…” he spoke haltingly and carded his hand through his hair, distressed and nervous.

Harry bent down and picked the letter up from the floor. Then he fixed his eyes on his godfather in the little mirror. “Don’t fret, Sirius. I already know. Marvolo sent me a letter.” He held the parchment so it was visible for the wizard through the communication device.

“You know?!” Sirius asked incredulous, “Are you sure? I can’t believe that bastard would tell you… something like that!”

“He actually tells me quite a lot. More than the Headmaster ever did. That I’m one of those horcruxes… he told me of his suspicion and then tested if it was true. I got a letter just now… “ Harry trailed off at the look on Sirius’ face.

Sirius opened and closed his mouth several times without managing to say a word. He closed his grey eyes and took a deep breath. “What does he plan to do? As long as you’re a… horcrux… you’ll be in danger. Remus will keep the situation with the Order under supervision… but… well, it is dangerous.”

“He wrote that he’s started researching to find a way to move the piece. And I believe him. But I have no idea how long something like this will take.” Deciding on a whim that Sirius was the best to ask about it, Harry changed the topic radically. “Sirius, do you know where to get another set of mirrors? Or how to make them? I could use a way of fast communication with Marvolo.”

Disbelievingly Sirius shook his head. “It’s really strange. I never would have thought that I would agree with or work together with the man who brought war… he is – was? – a monster. But at the moment I feel he is one of the few sane people… Am I dreaming?”

At that Harry started to laugh and could not stop until tears were streaming down his cheeks and he held his sides. The world must be ending, when Sirius started to work together with Lord Slytherin. Finally Harry started to speak again, a little out of breath. “Tell me about it! I feel like I’ve been dreaming since the day I was dragged to the Ministry to be adopted.” He wiped the tears from his face and spotted the still patiently waiting elf. “So about the mirrors…”

Sirius waved a hand. “Tell him to ask me, I’ll search for the notes we used to create this set. Be careful, Harry.”

The mirror went blank and Harry walked over to his desk to scribble a short note to Marvolo. In as few words as possible he told about the communication mirrors and Sirius’ offer to provide instructions on how to create a set, and about the reaction of his godfather to the information about horcruxes.

After the short note was finished, Harry handed it to the still waiting elf. With another bow the small green elf in a toga made from tea-towels accepted the missive and popped out of the room.

Yawning, Harry decided that now was the time to go to bed and sleep. The day tomorrow promised to be interesting. Soon Harry was snoring lightly in the dark room.

ooOoo
In London, Sirius set the mirror down and rubbed a hand over his eyes. What had happened to the world? Dumbledore, the man he had thought was the epitome of light, suggesting it might be necessary to kill a child. Kill Harry to make it possible for a – formerly? – insane madman to die properly.

And the madman in question seemingly helping to clear up missing persons cases from over a decade ago. Offering to lift a curse that would kill the Headmaster, which the old man got saddled with because he had meddled with something the man formerly known as Voldemort had wanted to protect.

It just didn’t match.

Sighing in frustration, Sirius sat down at his desk to write a short note to Lord Slytherin. He needed to ask a few questions and pass on the information about the mirrors. As both their houses were located in London, an owl shouldn't take too long to deliver the letter to the intended recipient.

Maybe they could manage a meeting in a few days.

Walking down to get a quick breakfast – porridge with assorted fruits and brown sugar – Marvolo thought back to the letter Henry had sent with the elf yesterday evening. In a way, it was funny how the information he had wanted to keep secret almost desperately, now was spreading so quickly.

Lord Black knew about the horcruxes, because a member of the Order of the Phoenix had told him about it. Maybe it was not so bad after all. He was another one dedicated to protecting the boy, and by lacking information he might not be able to do this to the best of his ability. Marvolo felt uncomfortable knowing that his secret to immortality was not so secret any longer. But considering what problems this approach had caused – sanity was a useful thing to possess – he might be better off undoing it.

Barty had placed a schedule for the day next to his bowl, together with a letter sealed with the Black crest. No surprise there. It only stood to reason that Lord Black would have more questions, and might want to discuss when the attempt to retrieve his brother's body would take place.

Marvolo sat down, placing the napkin on his lap, skimming over the schedule while taking the letter with the hand not holding the spoon. Seemed he had quite the packed day. The curse removal for the Headmaster to live and to further his reputation, a meeting with Xerxes regarding his school, a tea with the Malfoys and some selected guests, and then time for research in the evening.

Idly spooning his breakfast from the bowl into his mouth, Marvolo broke the seal with his other hand, unfolding the letter so he could read.

Lord Slytherin,
My godson informed me of his wish to have an easier and faster way of communication with his guardian. On my last visit to the school, I gave him one half of a pair of communication mirrors his father and I had used during our own time at Hogwarts. He asked me if it was possible to get him another pair. Enclosed with this letter are the notes and references we used back then to create the mirrors. I trust that you will be able to make them work for a set you and Harry might use.

Further, I would like to find a time when we could speak about different matters. Plans for the winter holidays and where Harry will be during that time, the revisions to the werewolf laws noted down for the October session of the Wizengamot, returning some of the Black possessions that were lent and not returned, etc.

Awaiting your reply with suggestions for a time to meet and talk,

Lord Black

That the only Black ever sorted into Gryffindor could write such a political letter was a surprise. It contained everything and was at the same time so delightfully vague that nothing could be proven, and someone not knowing what it was about would have trouble guessing the content. So Black wanted to ask questions about Henry and his status as a soul container, when Regulus’ body would be returned to the family, and a possible political alliance regarding the werewolf laws. Not a bad start into the new week.

On his way out to the entrance hall and the cloak hanging in the small cloak room, Barty came into his line of view, carrying several letters, bowing with a greeting. “Good morning, my Lord. Some letters have just arrived. I hope you have found the schedule for today?”

Nodding his head, Marvolo took the letters to see if there was one that needed his immediate attention. “I’m on my way to Gringotts. I want you to make arrangements with Lord Black for a meeting sometime this week. Sooner would be preferable.” While he talked to his secretary, Marvolo broke the seal on a letter from Dowager Longbottom. Skimming its contents, he added to his instructions. “And a meeting with the regent for House Potter. I will try to be back in time for lunch, but if there are complications I will apparate from the bank over to Xerxes’ school directly.”

Handing over the letters to his bowing assistant – what would a sixteen-year-old him think about the situation as it was now? – Marvolo took his cloak out of its place, slipped into it, and adjusted his robes before apparating to Diagon Alley. Time to work on the public image of a likeable, remorseful Lord Slytherin.

ooOoo

From the place dedicated to apparation near the white marble building of the bank, Marvolo easily spotted the group of three waiting for him. The mixture of a red-head, an old wizard in eye-wateringly-bright robes and a white beard, as well as a man with a peg leg was simply unique.
Once more checking the fall of his robes, Marvolo schooled his face into a polite smile and started on the short walk over to the others.

The Alley was not overly packed with people this early on a Monday morning, but those who were there threw him curious glances. The looks no longer were as hostile as during his first visit to Diagon right after he had adopted Henry. His work on his public reputation seemed to be doing what he wanted to achieve. And now was the time for the next act in this play.

“Good morning, Headmaster, Mr. Moody, Mr. Weasley,” he greeted pleasantly. “As we are all here, let us go inside.”

Marvolo registered the disapproving glare of the old auror and could only assume that the paranoid man didn’t approve of his seemingly lacking security. But as both Crabbe and Goyle were already here, ready to act if he called them, it truly was only an apparent lack. His need to appear as the non-threatening young Lord Slytherin would not go well together with himself surrounded by bodyguards. Furthermore, it would not do for him to look like he had followers. Especially as he did have them.

“Splendid idea, Tom!” the old fool proclaimed with a much-too-bright smile and twinkling blue eyes. “It is most advantageous that we all have the time today to solve this little problem.”

Marvolo reined in his first three angry responses to this casual use of his given name – which he still loathed – despite the fact they were not actually on a first-name basis.

He managed a polite – if frosty – smile as he started to walk, gesturing for the others to follow, and addressed the breach of protocol.

“I’m sure you are aware, Headmaster Dumbledore, that I am long since a grown man and one of the Lords of the Wizengamot. I would appreciate a more formal form of address.” That the old man only started to chuckle at this forced Marvolo to recall some calming breathing exercises to keep his cool.

“I always have trouble remembering to call former students by anything other than their given-name. I will try to do better, Lord Slytherin.” Inwardly sneering – Marvolo was proud he’d managed not to react violently at the condescending tone the old goat used for his name – he acknowledged this with a short nod as they crossed over the threshold.

He had been reluctant to actually remove the curse so soon, he had wanted to make the Headmaster suffer as long as he had suffered as a child, as Severus had suffered, as Henry had suffered, but now he was eager to get this over with. Blue-charmed eyes scanned the hall and headed for the first open teller he spotted.

“Lord Slytherin, you are here to use one of our rooms?” the fierce-looking Goblin asked as soon as Marvolo was near enough.

“That is in fact true,” the young looking wizard answered, giving a small bow from his neck, his hair swinging slightly with the motion.

“Follow me!” ordered the small being, jumping down from his seat and striding into the back of the big room, aiming for the smaller rooms that were rented out for use in rituals and negotiations between business partners and those that wanted to be business partners.

They walked into one of the rooms, and Marvolo looked around to see if it the room was suitable for their purpose. There was a small round solid table in the middle, surrounded by a few chairs,
the walls and floor were simple, unadorned stone, the light was provided by a few glowing crystals attached to the ceiling. Marvolo supposed it would do.

ooOoo

Bill was curious despite himself. They were here to get the man who once had been called a Dark Lord to remove a curse from the Headmaster, not to get Bill’s need to know about the most unusual curse he had seen in all his time as a curse-breaker fulfilled.

But it was hard to remember that the man with the blue eyes, wavy brown hair, and impeccable manners was capable of doing the most evil thing on this world without even batting an eye. That this man had split his soul… of course Bill had heard about horcruxes during his apprenticeship, they had been mentioned, and he had learned how to recognize and destroy them. But to know that there actually was a person who had made several alive today… that was something different. A cold shiver ran down his spine as the suspicion that Harry might be a horcrux came to his mind. He vividly remembered the long conversation held in his mother’s kitchen the last evening. Bill had promised to try to get a better feeling for the personality of the new Lord Slytherin during this appointment because of it. Because no one in his family was comfortable with the idea they might need to kill Harry.

Bill had mentioned that it was possible to merge a piece of a soul back into the main part if the one that made it felt true remorse about the murder used in the ritual. Now all the hopes of his parents were pinned to the idea that Lord Slytherin might take this route, and Harry would lead a happy life.

So he followed after the others into one of the smaller rooms rented to customers, and kept his eyes on Lord Slytherin and the man’s behaviour. He seemed to be annoyed, but considering the Headmaster had no concept of personal boundaries – Bill did not mind being called by his given name, but Fleur had objected to this habit a few times already, and she had not met the man that often! – there might be a valid reason for the other wizard to be pissed off.

“Headmaster, if you would please sit down at the table,” Lord Slytherin directed the Headmaster, moving another chair so he could sit down himself opposite the older wizard. “Before we start, I guess you insist on me taking a vow?”

The Headmaster nodded, smiling, and Alastor Moody growled something that probably should pass as a yes. Lord Slytherin nodded in acceptance and got a piece of parchment out of an inner pocket of his expensive-looking robes, presenting it to the three wizards and handing it to Moody as the man reached for it. “If you would check the wording.”

And so the retired auror did, reading the few words more than once – he obviously did not trust the man who had written them down – before he gave the parchment back, gruffly conceding their usability. “That should do.”

“Very well,” Lord Slytherin said, placing the parchment on the table and getting out the infamous wand made from yew, taking it with both hands and holding it in front of his chest just where the heart should be. Then he started to speak, and Bill could not shake the feeling that he was speaking with genuine sincerity. “I swear to only cast magic at Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore today in this room with the intent to keep him alive and remove the curse he currently suffers from. So mote it be.” A soft glow briefly surrounded the man, before he let go of his wand with one of
his hands, resting the wand on the table.

“Please lay your hand on the table, Headmaster. I need to take a look. If I remember correctly, this
curse was intended to kill in the first few minutes after making contact. I have to check in what way
it might have warped in the time it now has been festering in your hand.”

While the Headmaster complied with the polite request, Bill’s curiosity got the better of him. “How
did you combine the curses to become what they now are? I recognised the spells building the
basis but could not come up with an explanation on how they were combined.”

He got a slow blink in reaction to his question before the man visibly collected himself and started
a slow explanation. “I always was interested in spell creation and general magical theory – that’s
why I started to travel after graduation. When you add the unfortunate paranoia I was cursed with
into the mix, you get the determination to combine curses that don’t want to be combined.” He
paused a moment to cast a few spells on the blackened hand, humming to himself as he
contemplated the results. “How I finally managed to force the two to become one, you probably do
not really wish to know. Or you do not want to admit you know the theory to follow my
explanation.”

Bill needed a moment to decipher what the man was talking about. When he finally did understand,
a grin spread over his face. “No problem there. As a curse-breaker for Gringotts, I have a pass on
knowing about what is classified as dark magic by the Ministry. How else are we supposed to
know enough to break the curses we are paid to break?”

A contemplative look moved over Lord Slytherin’s face, and then he nodded slowly. “That is
almost reasonable. But I never shared this curse with anyone, and I have not documented it
anywhere. So there should be no need after today for anyone to know specifics about it. If you
truly are interested, though, we might be able to find a time to discuss this topic. Now I think we
should concentrate on the matter at hand.” He gave a small smirk in Bill’s direction, “These rooms
are paid for by the half hour.”

Now Bill watched not only out of duty to keep the Headmaster safe, but out of interest in Lord
Slytherin’s knowledge of curses. It was logical that a Dark Lord would know much about the Dark
Arts, and judging by what he had seen today, he no longer was sure that Dumbledore was right
with his guesses. Even if the man had created several horcruxes, this did not contradict the story
being told about Lord Marvolo Slytherin. It was possible that the man had met with an ancient
curse subjecting him to severe paranoia. And as paranoia was not a wise counsellor, creating a
horcrux as a failsafe against assumed would-be murderers following close behind could look like a
good idea.

Bill had never read or heard anything about the effects of destroying a horcrux on the one who had
created the object, nor did he know what creating more than one might do to a person. He would
love to ask the man who had done both about his experiences. All the information the eldest
Weasley son had seen had been several hundreds of years old, and those documents had been
copies of even older sources. The opportunity to speak with someone with first-hand experience
was really tempting. After all, not only the aspect of adventure had drawn him to his profession,
the possibility to do something good – by breaking curses – and to learn, had been equally
important.

In short order, Lord Slytherin cast a few complicated and lengthy spells until he finally declared,
“It seems the curse did not change that much over the time it now has been affecting you. So the
counter I devised should work without alterations.” Bill registered a brief wistful look that was
quickly hidden behind the polite and empty smile Lord Slytherin had sported the whole time. “I
can’t guarantee that it will be painless, but it should be done quickly. Are you ready, Headmaster?”

The head topped by long white hair bobbed in a short nod, and the young Lord started to chant a spell in a language that sounded like ancient Egyptian to Bill, pointing his wand at the blackened hand.

The effect was instantaneous.

A bright light surrounded the black hand, and warmth radiated out into the room. The old Headmaster’s eyes got a tight look to them, and he pressed his lips together. Probably trying to suppress sounds of pain, or so Bill suspected.

When the glowing finally stopped, the hand looked normal once again, and Lord Slytherin placed his wand back into the sleeve of his robe. “You should let a healer check you over. I’m not sure what long-term, exposure to this curse might have done to you. But the curse itself is now gone.” The man stood, giving a short nod to the Headmaster and clearly waiting for the man and his two companions to leave.

To Bill's regret – he wanted to ask so many questions! -- the Headmaster was eager to leave and with barely a greeting almost fled the room. Alastor quickly followed, and Bill had no real choice but to hasten after the others.

Maybe he could stay behind under the pretence that he had to do something here for his job. Bill really wanted to speak to Lord Slytherin for a moment. No harm in trying to gather information, right?

ooOoo

Glad that this had gone down without a hitch, and sad about the fact he had not been able to learn more about what long-term effects this curse had on someone, or what Severus’ attempts to halt its progress might have done, Marvolo waited a few moments before he left the room in search of a goblin that would present him with the bill he had to pay for the use of the room.

Just outside the room, he ran into the goblin he was searching for and William Weasley, waiting for him.

“That will be three galleons and four sickles, Lord Slytherin,” stated the goblin holding open his – or her, Marvolo never had managed to learn how to tell them apart – hand. Counting the coins into the open palm, Marvolo paid the rent for the room.

Without further words of greeting, the goblin left, and the two wizards were standing as alone as was possible in the big hall.

“Why are you still here, Mr. Weasley?” Marvolo did not dare guess why the man had remained behind, without anyone as backup or witness either.

“I wanted to talk to you, Lord Slytherin,” was the equally short and simple answer.

Marvolo gave the red-headed wizard a pointed look. That Weasley had waited to speak with him was obvious. The question was, what did he want to speak about? “What about?”
“For one, the curse you just removed from the Headmaster’s hand. But other things as well. Much of the information available is a copy of a copy, and often not even a good one. And I really would like to further my knowledge to be able to do my work better. I might even get a promotion that way.” The earnest gaze from the blue eyes was somewhat funny.

Had this really just happened? Did a Weasley – a family known to have fought valiantly against the Dark Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters – just ask to be instructed in the Dark Arts by a wizard known as dark? The one who had been said to have been Lord Voldemort?

A little bit wary – it could be some kind of trap – Marvolo slowly nodded. “I have a few hours’ time this evening. How about you?” He wanted to ask what his parents would say if they knew, and if he truly wanted to know about the Dark Arts. But he refrained, this maybe was an opportunity to gain a new follower. Giving those he wanted as followers what they wished to have had always been a good way to accomplish his goals and gain numbers for his Death Eaters.

“When and where?” the red-head asked eagerly.

“Have you ever been to Griffin House?” Weasley shook his head. “Meeting at the Leaky Cauldron?” Marvolo quickly calculated when he would be finished with his list of tasks for the day. “Around seven pm?”

Weasley nodded. “Works for me.” He nodded once again in greeting and strode off into the depths of the building, probably to his office or wherever he was working in the bank.

Marvolo quickly checked the time and noted with appreciation that he had enough time to go home and eat something before he needed to go to his next appointment.

oooOOooo

After he had gotten hardly any sleep, Kingsley had decided to go to work early. The news Headmaster Dumbledore had told them at the last Order meeting had simply left him unable to relax. A little mind-numbing parchment-shuffling hopefully would help him get to a point where he could find some sleep.

He was sorting some portkey applications as the door to the mess of tangled parchment was opened enthusiastically, and Dawlish walked into the chaos. A little irritated, Kingsley straightened his back and looked over into the grinning face of his fellow auror. What had the man so happy? With the news from yesterday -- that it even was possible to do something as evil as splitting a soul! -- he felt his resolve to work together with the man he suspected to be a Death Eater crumble.

“Shacklebolt, I hope you have brought your winter cloak. Here is our portkey to the island!” Triumphantly the other man held up a loop of rope such as they used for official portkeys issued to the auror force.

Kingsley frowned, that had gone rather quick. Considering that they wanted to keep their purpose as quiet as they could manage, he had calculated that it would be at least a week before they would get a portkey out to Azkaban. He just had to ask. “That was fast. How did you manage to get one on such short notice, Dawlish?”
"Once I told Malfoy and Nott about our idea, they made sure that someone was sent to check on the prison, now that the Dementors are not guarding it. It was easy enough to make sure we were the ones sent. So when do we want to go?"

Kingsley felt his metaphorical feathers bristle. This blatant use of connections to hasten a process and probably make some others wait for their portkeys, felt simply wrong. That two men he knew had been Death Eaters and probably still were, had been instrumental in this… well, there really was no place for childish pettiness in their search for the one who had sent Dementors after children.

The dark-skinned auror sighed, took a deep breath, and rolled his shoulders to get some of the tension out of them.

Dawlish furrowed his brow. “What’s wrong, Kingsley? What happened? I feel like I walked into a cold-cupboard. Have I done something wrong?”

A wad of parchment fell down back to the ground and Kingsley rubbed his eyes. Why was he blaming Dawlish? He had suspected for a long time that the man was a Death Eater, why was he now less able to work with the man while they still had the same goal? There was someone out there who sent Dementors after children. Harry Potter and two other boys his age had escaped an attempt at their souls because the boy was able to cast a Patronus.

Even if Voldemort had split his soul – and the Headmaster had not presented any real evidence, only two objects and a story – what part had the man’s minions in this?

“Rumours, Dawlish, nothing but rumours. They kept me from sleep the last night, and now I’m grumpy. Don’t mind me. I brought my cloak, so when do we go?”

The look Dawlish gave him was sceptical, but in the spirit of mutually ignored alliances he let it slide, shrugging. “Whenever we want. It is a password-, not a time-activated portkey.”

“Then we should go now, before I fall asleep on my feet,” Kingsley decided, hiding a yawn behind one hand.

ooOoo

The weather out on the North Sea was pleasant. For September. It was cold and slightly windy, so if not for the water-repelling charms they had cast on their crimson auror robes, they would have been drenched to the bones in minutes by the spray.

To escape the biting wind, both bent over and hastened to enter the oppressive building towering over them. Why the portkey always had to deposit the incoming aurors outside the prison… well, it was because of security concerns, but it was inconvenient. Especially when the weather was bad. And it almost always was unpleasant.

They walked past the gate into the small corridor leading up to the office occupied by the one lone auror on duty. Normally no human was guarding the prison out of the few times a year there was an inspection. But as the Dementors were secluded, confined to the most remote edge of the island, the office was now manned around the clock.

In here it was warmer, as a small fire was burning happily in the stove standing in the middle of the
room. Against one wall stood a simple cot, which was occupied at the moment.

Dawlish walked over and took the man’s shoulder to shake him awake. “Simons! Wake up! We need your help!”

Kingsley grinned to himself, walking over to the stove to warm his hands. He always got cold hands when he was out in a storm. He watched, amused, as Dawlish woke the auror on duty. This was a job he did not wish on his worst enemy.

A grumbling auror Simons walked over from his bed, and poured himself a cup of old coffee. “What do you two want here? I guess you’re not intended to be my relief?”

“Indeed not, Simons. Sorry.” Kingsley shrugged. “We need to check some of the records. There are records here, aren’t there?”

“Sure, over there.” Simons gestured with his coffee cup over to a rickety door, before he walked over to a chair and sat down.

With a glint of hope in their eyes, Dawlish and Kingsley looked at each other and took a few quick steps over to the room holding the records. As Kingsley got a good look at the filing cabinets, however, the hope was dimmed on the spot. It seemed it had been some time since anyone had had even a little bit of motivation to file the orders in a way conducive to finding them again.

“Wonderful!” Dawlish drawled sarcastically. “It seems we have exchanged one sorting job for another.”

Sighing, Kingsley nodded in agreement. “At least we know that here we will find only records, papers, and orders that have something to do with the prison. No more portkey forms, orders for ink, and other useless drivel.”

“Let’s start to search. Maybe a summoning charm will work here?”

Conceding that it might work and certainly was worth trying, Kingsley got his wand out and cast the charm, concentrating on orders sending Dementors away from the prison. “Accio Dementor Marching Orders.”

A surprisingly small stack of parchment came flying out of several different drawers, heading for Kingsley and falling down around him.

Grinning at each other – this was a much more manageable amount of paperwork – they started each on one side, and worked quickly through the orders. They knew when the attack had happened and where. All orders that did not match were quickly tossed aside.

While they worked, Kingsley thought about the ease with which he worked together with a man who was a Death Eater. Or most likely was. Who was he kidding, he was sure the man was a Death Eater, but he had no evidence at all. It was frustrating, to know that there were Death Eaters in the Ministry, but there was nothing he could do about it.

“Shacklebolt! I think I’ve found it!” Dawlish waved a parchment in front of his face, a grin making him look a few years younger.

Kingsley stood up from his crouch and walked over. Looking at the parchment in Dawlish’s hand, brown eyes flitted over the filled-in information. The time and place of the order matched the time and place of the attack on Severus Snape and the three teenagers he had been escorting.
But… Kingsley furrowed his brow. “Jane Smith? Do you know a Jane Smith working anywhere in the Ministry?”

Dawlish shook his head. “No. I don't think that there is a Jane Smith anywhere.” He thought a moment. “A forgery?”

“Probably. So the person sending Dementors after children is more intelligent than I had thought. Male? Or female, like the name suggests?”

Dawlish snorted, shaking his head. “Don’t think we should assume anything. But at least we can now prove that the Dementors were indeed sent by someone in the Ministry. Maybe that will help Simons to get back home.”

After this they quickly found a place for the other files, before they took their leave, promising Simons to send over a bottle of cider and news as soon as they heard about the effects their discovery would have.

After they had reported to Scrimgeour, Dawlish quickly vanished – probably to report to Voldemort, Kingsley guessed – and the dark-skinned auror sat down at his desk to write the report they had to hand in. After he finished with the paperwork – he really had developed an aversion to all the paperwork they had to do – he planned to go research ways to follow a forgery to the one who had made it. There just had to be a way to get this information.

oooOOooo

The first day of lessons after he had gotten his own room, Harry had the opportunity to observe a varying bunch of reactions. Hermione was happy for him and the quiet place to study they now had access to. Ron was mostly indifferent, happy that Harry felt safer but sad that his best mate no longer shared a room with him. Most of Gryffindor was either excited to know that there were rooms that never were used because there were so seldom any heirs to one of the Founders at the school. But a few made jokes about a scaredy cat sorted into the house of the brave.

Harry tried to ignore the muttering on his way down to breakfast and had the opportunity to work on his self-control as the other houses joined in on the gossiping as the day progressed. The camp of those thinking he was afraid and why had he been sorted into Gryffindor was the biggest. Ravenclaws mostly added explanations and speculations about a narrow decision of the Hat to the rumours, Hufflepuffs placed the emphasis on the fact that some Gryffindors obviously lacked in loyalty to one of their own, and Slytherins were almost silent on the matter.

That last reaction surprised Harry the most, and the whole way from History down to the dungeons and the Potions classroom, Ron speculated about a hidden agenda the slimy snakes had to have, because why else would they not chime in with the others?

Harry suspected the reaction had more to do with his status as an honorary member of the House due to the fact he was Heir Slytherin than with any hidden plots. And when he demanded that Ron explain what the dastardly plot was, he got no satisfying answer.

His red-headed best mate only glared at the Slytherins, who had found them and were trailing behind a few paces, obviously keeping an eye on them, as if he wanted to point out that there just had to be a reason for them to follow Harry as if they were puppies.
At the end of the Potions class, Professor Snape gave out the last essays as each student placed his or her phial of the potion they had to brew on the desk. When it was Harry’s turn to hand in his sample of a Strengthening Solution, Severus Snape handed over his scroll and for once had no sour expression on his face. “It seems you have inherited your mother’s talent in potions after all. Your work has improved in comparison to last year, Mr. Slytherin. Keep up the good work.”

On the dreary Monday this comment – delivered in the normal dry tone the Potions Master was prone to use – was a light in the darkness, carrying Harry through a dismally boring defence lesson. There just had to be something they could do. Hermione constantly was muttering that they were in their OWL year and if the lessons continued in this way, they never would be able to pass the exams with acceptable marks.

And in the back of Harry’s mind was still the question of whether to ask to be resorted or if he was better off staying where he was. Maybe he should just wait to see if his change in rooms would change anything and if the Aurors found anything. It was a plan that was easy enough, so maybe that was what he should do.

ooOoo

The Slytherins were watching the reactions of the school as well. Draco in particular was watching like a hawk at the way the Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs reacted to the news.

It was oddly reminiscent of the behaviour of the whole school during their second year, when they had all called him the Heir of Slytherin, or last year, when he had been shunned as a cheat for smuggling himself into the tournament.

“Did you know that there are extra rooms for the heirs of the Founders?” Greg wanted to know as they sat at the Slytherin table during lunch, eating their vegetable soup with freshly baked bread.

“No,” Draco answered, as Theo and Blaise had their mouths full at the moment, “but it seems reasonable.”

It was breathtaking how fast the rumours had been spread. The whole of Hogwarts already knew about the extra room at the top of Gryffindor tower – the descriptions Draco had heard so far were so different that he was quite sure that no one had actually seen them yet – and the fact that Henry Slytherin had the opportunity to ask to be re-sorted. The blond suspected that one of the Aurors, or a teacher, had spoken about it where students were able to listen, starting the rumours that had run like wildfire through the school.

“Have you heard what the older years have said? How Po… Slytherin greeted his … father? He actually called him that!” Pansy was really excited about the fact, and Draco had to stop himself from rolling his eyes.

“Of course he did! After all, he is Harry’s father,” Nott snorted and took another piece of bread. “What else should he call him with the audience he had?”

“Audience? He’s a Gryffindor! You don’t really expect me to believe he would pay mind to something as political as the proper form of address in front of an audience?” Blaise asked incredulously. “Never!”

Theo shook his head, sending his hair flying. “You do underestimate him. I’ve spent quite some
time with him this summer. He lives up to his new last name quite effortlessly, as far as I can see.”

“You don't think he was sincere?” Daphne wanted to know, setting down her spoon, as she was finished with her meal.

Draco was not sure himself and resolved to stay silent. He still wanted to get closer to Slytherin, not only because his father would very much like him to be friends with the Dark Lord’s son and heir, but because he liked the teen he was getting to know. He was different from most of the boys he had known growing up, but there was a bright mind under all that Gryffindor bravado. An interesting contradiction. That he could not actually tell if he had meant to call the Dark Lord “father” because he had been brainwashed in this short time with the man, or because he was so gullible that he had come to feel something for the murderer of his parents, or because he knew it was the political thing to do, only added to the fascination.

“That's the funny thing,” Theo answered, as no one seemed to want to speak up. “He could have been, or he just said it to make the right impression. I feel like it would be equally likely.”

As the food vanished from the table and all around them the other students gathered their belongings to make their way over to their next classes, the fifth-year Slytherins did the same.

“Who can keep a look-out for Slytherin until he has to be in DADA later?” Daphne asked – she was the unofficial coordinator to make sure one of them was near the Dark Lord’s heir whenever they could manage – getting a short nod from Theo. “I have a free period as well. I’ll ask him if he needs help with his runes homework.”

They quickly split into different directions, Draco going up to the North Tower and Divination. He now wished he had opted for another class, as it was obvious it was not as easy as he had been led to believe. Putting up with the batty behaviour of the Professor put quite a strain on him. Better hurry, the way up to the incense-laden classroom was long and would take up all the time between lunch and the start of the afternoon lessons even if he did hurry.

**oooOOooo**

Late on Monday evening a short note made its round via owl to a small group of people. It read:

*We start tonight! My contact told me tomorrow would be ideal for our outing, as the storm will cease during the night. We will meet at the place and time we agreed to.*

And was not signed.

**oooOOooo**

Bill was the first to arrive at the Leaky Caldron, as he was a little early. He asked Tom, the owner
of the pub, to give him a little nook with a good view of the room to wait in, and ordered a warm butterbeer. It would warm him up, as it was a slightly windy day, and did not have enough alcohol to have a negative impact on his senses and reaction times.

The red-headed wizard didn't have to wait long before the young-looking wizard he had come to meet made his way through the door from Diagon Alley, looking around the place and spotting the waiting Weasley almost immediately.

“Mr. Weasley, I hope you did not have long to wait,” greeted the tired-looking Lord, stopping just short of the table Bill was sitting at.

“I was a little bit early, so no, I didn't wait long. Please sit down, Lord Slytherin,” Bill answered, getting up for a proper greeting. Even if the man presumably was his enemy, the manners his mother had drilled into him through constant repetition kicked in.

After a short pause to think over the suggestion – or so Bill assumed by the look on the man’s face – Lord Slytherin nodded and opened his cloak to get more comfortable, sliding into the bench so he had a wall at his back and his view was over the room.

Before they could start a conversation, Tom the owner came over, looking a smiling question to the addition at the table. “I would like two slices of apple-tart with cream.”

“Well, thank you.”

A few moments later there was a plate with apple tart on their table, and Lord Slytherin got out his wand to cast a few privacy wards around them. “I presume you would not want anyone to listen in to our conversation?” Bill was asked.

Bill nodded. He always preferred privacy for a conversation, and for this one it was almost a requirement. In fact, he felt a little uneasy, sitting here, with You-Know-Who – or at least the man who had been him – intending to ask the man questions about horcruxes and dark magic in general. Suddenly he no longer was sure that this had been such a bright idea.

The fact that the man now started to eat his tart as if he had all time in the world, helped Bill not one bit. A few minutes and one piece of tart later, Bill gathered all of the courage that had decided the hat to sort him into Gryffindor and started with his questions. “The Headmaster claimed you made a horcrux, Lord Slytherin. I was wondering where you might have learned about them. I only heard of them when my instructor told me about them, during my apprenticeship.” He took a sip from his butterbeer and shortly contemplated whether he should tell the man of the one time he had witnessed the destruction of one.

Why not? Nothing ventured, nothing gained. “And I only ever encountered one, during my time in Egypt. And now the Headmaster tells such a story…” he trailed off, his eyes almost glued to the man sitting across from him.

Leisurely eating a bite from his tart, Lord Slytherin returned the gaze from blue eyes with a contemplative look of his own.

“If I ever did what Headmaster Dumbledore claims I did, would I be so foolish as to admit to it?” Lord Slytherin gave Bill a pointed look, setting his spoon down. “As for where I first heard of them... In my day at Hogwarts, there were a few books about them in the restricted section. As to why you have not seen them there... I would guess that Dumbledore removed them once he
became Headmaster. He has always had a penchant for restricting access to information he deems dangerous.” The man smiled sweetly before he asked a question of his own. “You encountered a horcrux in Egypt?”

Bill nodded, shuddering as he remembered. “Yes, it was in a sort of tomb, deep in the desert. It was secured and displayed next to a trap of sorts. The inscriptions and murals told a story about a wizard striving for immortality. He killed someone important to the Pharaoh. When he was apprehended, he was killed – or more likely his body was destroyed – his wraith captured in the trap, and he was condemned to an eternity imprisoned. Nameless. My superior decided we should destroy the horcrux and free what was left of the man to go on.”

Bill felt a chill run down his spine, and judging by the look on the other’s face, he was feeling something similar. It was a horrifying prospect: An eternity trapped as a bodiless spirit. If the stories were true, the man now sitting at a table in the Leaky Cauldron, eating apple tart, had experienced something quite similar.

“That is quite a… disconcerting story you are telling there. So Gringotts destroys horcruxes it encounters?”

Bill nodded, it was not a secret that such dangerous magic was always destroyed, even if it was not common knowledge. “The goblins are against such practices. And by all accounts, as vague as they are, there is not much to be done for… the creator of such things after a certain amount of time.”

Taking the last sip from his butterbeer, Bill tried to come up with a question to truly get some answers. Up till now he had been the one giving out information, not what he wanted to achieve with this meeting.

“Even if you don't want to admit anything, I would guess you researched them?”

Lord Slytherin nodded to this, a small smirk on his lips. “As I’ve always been deeply interested in all kind of magic since I discovered the eclectic conglomeration of magics the Ministry categorises as Dark Magic.” He made air-quotes and rolled his eyes, intriguing Bill with the easygoing and laid-back attitude the man was displaying. “There simply is no rhyme or reason to which magic is banned and which is not. Some things are banned because they are hard to control, others – like the Unforgivables – for the ease with which they can be cast, or what they do to the caster, some because they violated some morals or customs from a long time ago… It became my goal to get this tangled mess sorted out, regain legal access to those magics that had absolutely no reason to be banned.”

The man sighed, taking another bite from his tart. “Sadly, the curse derailed me quite a bit. But what happened in the last years has given me a new chance to achieve my goals.”

They danced around the topic Bill really wanted to talk about – horcruxes and the rare first-hand experience he now was sure the other man had – talking about the curse that had been removed from the Headmaster’s hand this morning and others Bill had seen in Egypt, and what Lord Slytherin had studied on his travels.

They only left once Tom made rather unsubtle signs that he wanted to close his bar for the day.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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“Look where you’re stepping, you dunce!” an indignant voice hissed from the lower places of the boat they would be using. “You almost snapped my wand!”

“Then don’t put it on the floor!” was the hissed, angry reply.

It was a starry night from the 18th into the 19th of September. And the tension in the air was thick enough to walk on. As the Muggle had said, the wind had lessened enough that they were confident to make the way over to Azkaban and get their family and friends out of that miserable place!

“Everyone on board?” Murmurs all around answered and they set their plan into motion, starting the engine.

Over an hour later they could see the silhouette of the prison building against the dark night sky with the small crescent moon. They deactivated the motor and covered the rest of the distance in silence. After all, they did not want to alert any Aurors that might be stationed at the island.

Finally the boat made contact with the small jetty used when a boat had to transport something to the island, and the small troupe made their way much onto solid ground much more smoothly than they had boarded.

Falling into long trained habits of using hand signals and almost soundless steps – impossible to hear over the sound of the waves – they made their way up the slippery steps and through the rusty gate into the halls of Azkaban.

It was not difficult to find the guard-room and incapacitate the sleeping Auror with a stupefy and an incarcerus.

“Let’s split and meet again here in an hour,” their leader whispered and got answering nods from all around. They did just that, a few running down the steps to the place where the higher-risk prisoners were held – one of those they wanted to free had killed a few muggles when he had been drunk – a few running off up the stairs to get those that were held only for minor crimes, and one remaining with the Auror, to make sure that he would not wake up and raise the alarm.

ooOoo

Waking up from her restful sleep and dreams of raids at the side of her fellows, Bella sat up on her old and worn pallet, listening intently. There was someone walking in the hall just outside her cell. Since the Dementors had been removed – for what reason she still didn’t know – her mind had cleared considerably. Now all she could think about was her certainty that her Lord was back and that she had to return to his side. At whatever cost.
She stood and moved silently over to the door with the small barred window that gave her a limited view of the hall. There were two wizards in shabby robes walking through, checking every cell to see who was held there. The cells had no numbers and no indicator who was held where. So the taller of the two glanced into each small window, wand held before his face and into the cell with a lumos, while the shorter one seemed to whisper some name. Bella snorted and took a step to the side so she would not be seen, but near enough to nick the wand out of the unworthy wizard's hold.

She didn’t have to wait long until a lit wand was thrust between the bars on her cell and a voice stage-whispered “Dick! Dick, are you in here?”

“No,” purred Bella and quickly had the wand in her hand. It did not feel as good as her own, original wand had, but it would do for the time being. She quickly cast “Stupefy!” followed by a quick spell to open the door to her prison of the last far-too-many long years.

Pointing the stolen wand at the back of the smaller of the two wizards she stupefied him as well. She would have liked to cast a killing curse, but she knew she would need all her strength later. She had not performed magic in over a decade, and even though the curse was easy to cast – she never had trouble conjuring the intent to kill – it needed a lot of magical strength. And she would have to free the others, get back to the mainland, and be able to react to unforeseen problems.

She dearly wished to torture the two, but she managed to restrain her impulses. There would be ample opportunity for torture and death once she was back with her Lord. Bella summoned the wand from the other wizard – they would need as many as they could get – bound them, and walked over to the next cell, where her husband had been locked in.

In short order she had freed Rodolphus and Rabastan, handed over the spare wand, and had wandered off to free the rest of them. Rookwood, Travers, Dolohov, and whoever else had ended up here and was still alive. She distinctly remembered that Bartemius’ body had been floated along the hall, many years ago. At least it felt as if it had been a long time ago. How was she to know, who had died besides the young man?

On their way up the group of ten Death Eaters encountered a mixed group of wizards who looked totally gobsmacked to see another group of prisoners strolling through the halls.

A short battle later – Bella cackled maniacally at the other group’s abysmal performance – and each of the ten had a wand that was working reasonably well, while a mixed group of criminals and prisoners lay dead or dying on the dirty and wet stones of the passageway up to the guard-room.

They silently walked up the stairs to the guard-room and filed in through the door, seeing that there were only two wizards in the room, one of them bound. The only witch of the group snickered as Mulciber bound the wizard standing near the stove, warming his hands, his wand tucked away in a pocket. Quickly she had found a knife on the table used for the guard’s meals and almost skipped over to the man lying on his back, his eyes wide with terror.

“Who have we here?” she sing-songed, a manic glint in her eyes and lights reflecting from the shiny blade dancing over her emaciated features. “You will tell lovely Bella how you managed to come here and how you had planned to leave.” A sickly sweet smile revealed teeth desperately in need of some care, and the distinct smell of piss – already all-permeating through the prison – intensified.

Before Bella could act on her unspoken threat, the wizard on the floor already started to ramble, telling them everything. “We came with a boat, a muggle one. Planned to leave with it too. It's down at the coast. We have enough fuel… Please don’t hurt me!” the man almost whined, shuddering violently in his bounds.
Disappointed that she did not get to torture the sniffling wizard, Bella plunged the knife into the man’s chest and his heart, instantly killing him.

“Right,” Mulciber drawled, getting the others’ attention. “If no one has a better idea, I think we should use their boat to get away from this gods-forsaken island, and then find a place to lay low for a while.” They each looked at their group, assessing their possibilities. One witch, nine wizards, malnourished and ill, borrowed wands their only weapons, tattered prison clothes all there was to prevent them from freezing to death. There was no hope they could apparate from the island, and calling for their Lord through their marks was not the best idea so long as they were still essentially prisoners.

They agreed to take the plan for escape the now-dead wizard had told them and left without further ado.

ooOoo

Simons woke up with the headache of the century, bound on his cot. It took him a while until he remembered the one brief moment between waking and being assaulted before he again remembered nothing.

With difficulty he managed to sit up, leaning against the wall, to get a better view of his surroundings. There was a man lying on the floor next to the furnace, a knife sticking out of his chest, a puddle of drying blood all around him. There were no signs of a fight or anything else different about the room.

Whatever had happened, it looked like he was lucky to be still alive!

It took a few minutes until Simons had managed to hop and shuffle over to the stone he had to press his palm to so the Ministry would be informed that something was not right on the island, that reinforcement was needed at Azkaban. Since the first time he had had guard duty here, he had been convinced that this was the worst way to organize a call for backup.

He hated his life, he really did.

oooOOooo

The morning of her birthday – a Tuesday this year – Hermione got up early, as she did any day of school. The other girls sleeping in her dormitory congratulated her with polite smiles. But that was all. After the disastrous start into their first year, all possibilities for a close friendship had been gone. And now that the whole school knew that she was heiress to the Lestrange family, the tentative bonding she had achieved over the Yule Ball last year was in ruins. It was sad, but not something Hermione was unfamiliar with. She had been an awkward child, not bonding easily with others. Harry and Ron had been her first close friends. She grinned. There were things you could not experience together without forming a bond. Defeating a troll was definitely among them.

With a spring in her step, she made her way down to the common room where she was sure Harry and Ron would be waiting, eager to get down to the Great Hall for breakfast. She was not waiting
for a gift or congratulations, after all, the boys had not acknowledged her birthday in the years before. But when she was honest, she had not really told them about it. So how were they to know?

ooOoo

Harry had thought long and hard what he should get Hermione for her birthday. After he had been ashamed and horrified over the fact that he had not really done something big for the three birthdays his friend had had since they had become friends, he had decided he had to make up for the oversight this year.

As he knew what it felt like when your birthday was ignored, there was no excuse for ignoring it any longer now that he knew the date. It was not a good feeling, so he wanted to make the day a happy one for Hermione, sparing her further unhappiness.

His first idea had been to get her some book or a nice quill. But then he had had another idea. Something more unusual, more personal. A thing he could do, and which not something that could be bought at a store.

He had wanted to remind Ron of their friend's birthday at the end of the last year, but had not done so, Cedric’s death and the happenings at the graveyard overriding everything. And with all that had happened over the summer, and the time they were not really talking to one another, he simply had forgotten to do so later.

As Ron joined him in the common room – he had to repack his bookbag – Harry leaned over to whisper into his red-headed friend’s ear. “You know it’s Hermione’s birthday today, don’t you?”

Ron’s eyes got wide, so he probably had not remembered. Before he could begin to frantically demand that Harry help him find a gift right here and now, they heard feet on the stairs coming down from the side of the tower where the girls’ dormitories were located. Followed by Parvati and Lavender, Hermione walked down the stairs, smiling.

A little nervous, Harry got his gift for his friend out of his book bag. “Happy birthday, Hermione!” Harry greeted the bushy-haired witch, giving her a quick, brotherly hug, before holding out a small scroll of his best sketching paper to her. “I hope you like it.”

With a smile, Hermione accepted the scroll tied with a Gryffindor-red ribbon, and carefully opened the bow to unfurl the paper. Her smile broadened into a pleased grin as her eyes fell onto the sketch Harry had made for her.

It showed a big cat with a bushy tail and a scrunched face, curled up in front of the fire here in the common room. It was done with charcoal on paper and so Harry had had no way to capture the special colour of Crookshanks’ fur, but he was pleased with his work nonetheless.

“Oh, it's wonderful, Harry! Thank you!” She enveloped Harry in a crushing hug, careful not to crumble the picture of her cat.

The moment the young witch stepped back from her raven-haired friend, Ron took a step towards her, giving her a hug. “Happy birthday, Hermione.” Their friend did not comment on his lack of a present for Hermione, and neither did the others.

“I'll store this in my trunk. I'll be right back!” And Hermione was gone, up the stairs and back to
her dormitory. That was why they left a little after the other Gryffindors, making them the last to leave the tower.

Down in the Great Hall, Harry watched with quiet amusement as a number of Slytherin students made their way over to the Gryffindor table, carrying small parcels. Draco and Theo were among the first to come over, greet Hermione, and present her with small tokens. As she had learned over the summer in the lessons she had had together with Harry, she accepted the gifts with the ceremony that was expected, opening an assortment of the finest confections Honeydukes had to offer.

After a few Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws with family in the Wizengamot had come over to congratulate her, Neville stood up from his place at the table to walk over to where Harry and his friends were sitting. He had a smile on his face and a small plant in his hands. “Happy birthday, Hermione. I hope you like flowers. This is one of the amaryllis family, and keeps away small insects and bad dreams with its pleasant scent.”

Neville’s nervousness dissipated the moment Hermione took the plant from him with a bright smile on her face.

Harry was happy when they were able to sit down and start on their breakfast, and he had to keep in a few sniggers because Ron practically threw himself onto the plates. The youngest Weasley son was always hungry.

After some time – they all were well into their meal – the owls came with the morning post. Quite the flock of owls landed on the table, and some plates – prompting Ron to bluster and complain – in front of Hermione, each of them carrying a parcel.

One by one the birthday girl opened the packets, smiling the whole time. Her parents had sent her an exemplar of a periodical dedicated to new or interesting discoveries in the magical world, standing in for a subscription they had gotten her. Harry got to read the accompanying letter, and he smiled over the notion that Hermione once had something similar but Muggle, using it as a starting point for research projects, prompting her parents into asking about options to get something of the kind in the wizarding world.

Marvolo – or Lord Slytherin as he had signed his letter – had sent the copy of an old diary written by one of the Founders. Harry chuckled at the gleam in Hermione’s chocolate brown eyes, earning himself a half-hearted glare.

The last parcel was from Xerxes Lestrange and contained a camera and a letter informing Hermione that she would get new film as she needed it and where she should send used film to get it developed. She took a picture of Harry and Ron, causing Ron to frown because he had been eating.

Their merriment suddenly was broken as they realized that it was eerily quiet in big parts of the Great Hall. Harry looked around and noticed the now-pale Neville, several more pale students at their own and the other tables, and many students bent over the Daily Prophet whispering. A quick look at the head table and the professors sitting there revealed that they also were reading the Prophet and looked decidedly pale as well.

Harry snatched up Hermione’s copy of the newspaper – while Hermione stored her presents in her enlarged bag – and saw the cause for the commotion right there on the front page. In big letters, the words “Azkaban Breakout” declared an unusual occurrence. Beneath that, the pictures of several feral-looking wizards and one witch in the usual striped garb of the Azkaban inmates were printed, sneering up at him. Only moments later the three friends were as engrossed in the news as their
Stirring honey into his fresh cup of coffee, Severus ignored most of the conversation at the head table. He was not a morning person, never had been, and the chipper way that Pomona and Filius were talking did not help him enjoy the morning of another day teaching.

An owl he had seen a few times carrying Sonja’s letters to him made her way over to where he was sitting when all the other owls brought this morning’s post. Hiding a smile behind his coffee cup – he had to maintain his professor persona – he watched the owl land and after setting the cup down untied the letter from its leg.

His name was written in her neat script on the envelope, and Severus lost no time in opening the letter with his knife, wandlessly casting the few detection charms he always used for his post while at Hogwarts. Most dangerous spells, curses, and jinxes were countered by the wards around the school, so he mostly tested for poisons and other dangerous substances.

Reading the short, cheerful letter, his dark eyes began to sparkle. She agreed that visiting a theatre or opera in London in the next week or two was a really good idea. The few productions that were held in the wizarding world were either not up to her standards, or they were performed by amateurs from high-standing families, so she never was invited. Sonja left it up to him to decide when they would go, only stating that she would prefer a theatre production, something funny and/or interesting. At the end she wished him a nice week teaching and told him that they had received a new batch of assorted rare snake venoms.

Folding the letter and placing it in an inner pocket close to his heart, Severus grabbed for his copy of the Daily Prophet, noticing the tense atmosphere around him, and his look at the first page instantly gave him the reason.

So what his Lord had predicted now had happened. Their comrades incarcerated at the prison had seized the opportunity and fled.

Dark eyes quickly scanned the article, cataloguing the few bits of information actually scattered about the lengthy diatribe of rumours and speculation. The tendency of the biggest newspaper in wizarding Britain to speculate and exaggerate was truly annoying at times such as this.

It seemed that nothing was really known at this point in time. Only that ten Death Eaters – among them all three Lestranges and Mulciber – had fled while several others had been killed. The only other useful information was that the Ministry had sent Aurors to investigate, and the Wizengamot would hold an emergency meeting this very day.

So Severus would not be called to a meeting any time soon. Best to be watching his colleagues, to gather information as his position as spy demanded. Dumbledore probably would start asking him questions right after breakfast had ended. Quickly assessing his lesson plans for the day, Severus was sure that he would manage not to be able to speak with the Headmaster for any length of time conducive to the sharing of sensitive intelligence until the early evening. And by then there was a better chance of being summoned.

Severus really hoped he would be able to speak with his Lord to double-check what information he
should share with the Headmaster.

With the ringing of the bell declaring breakfast was over, Severus rose from his place at the table – eggs only half eaten – and made his way down to his classroom. He sighed at the thought that the nervous students would be even more distracted than usual during his class. Maybe he should change the lessons to lectures and delay the practical application in brewing to a later date.

ooOoo

The Slytherin students were enjoying their breakfast, when suddenly one of the younger years called over to Draco “Your aunt is in the paper!”

A little confused – why would Andromeda Tonks be in the paper? – Draco turned to face that way, setting down his goblet of milk, and got a picture of his aunt Bellatrix, in Azkaban inmates’ clothes – more like rags – shoved into his face. Blinking slowly a few times, the blond fifth-year student swallowed. “Can I borrow the paper?”

He quickly read the article and then gave the paper back. He was surrounded by concerned faces. They all were unsure what to think of this. Draco had only ever heard stories about his two aunts. One cast from the family for marrying a muggle-born wizard, the other in Azkaban since he had been a baby. In fact, his mother did not speak of them often. Draco had always assumed that his mother was ashamed of her older sisters, one for getting caught and the other for falling for a man who was not suitable.

He badly wanted to speak with his parents, ask how he should behave, react to the situation. He thought about writing a letter, but was not sure if that would work out. Some things better were not put on parchment. Maybe if he worded it right? Played upon the scared-little-wizard-afraid-of-his-aunt angle? It might work.

The bell sounded, telling the whole school that the first lesson was to start soon. His letter would have to wait, but he was not sure he would be able to concentrate on lessons with this news on his mind.

oooOOooo

After the late evening and the nice conversation, Marvolo had fallen asleep fast. Only to be woken in the early hours of the morning by a frantic-looking Barty – in his nightshirt and with dishevelled hair standing up in every which-way – standing by his bed, holding a letter sealed with the crest of the Wizengamot.

Pushing back the covers, Marvolo swung his feet over the edge of his bed, taking the letter from his assistant’s hands. “What is this about?” the Dark Lord asked in a voice still heavy with sleep.

“I’m not sure, my Lord. The owl did not wait for an answer,” Barty answered with a small bow, attempting to order his hair a little with his hands as he came up from the bow.

As the simplest solution was to open the letter and read it, Marvolo did just that. The seal broke
and a short note on the official parchment was slipped out of the envelope. Red eyes quickly scanned the few lines of hasty writing done by a dicta-quill.

“Barty, get dressed. We are needed at the Ministry for an emergency meeting. Meet me in the entrance hall in ten minutes.”

After Barty had vanished from the room, Marvolo tossed his nightshirt onto the bed and walked over to his wardrobe to get out fresh undergarments, socks, trousers, and shirt, as well as his robes in family colours. A freshening charm would have to stand in for a shower, there simply was not enough time for a proper one.

While he dressed, strapping the wand holster to his left arm, Marvolo tried to predict with what accusation he would be confronted once they had all assembled. After all, the Death Eaters that had been still alive in Azkaban had just made a successful attempt to flee. If they did not try to pin this on him, he would be surprised.

For a brief moment Marvolo thought about informing his followers to make them aware that they might be contacted by their fellows. But he decided against it. There just was not enough time, and it might be preferable that their reactions, if Aurors were to call on them, were genuine.

When he stepped into the entrance hall some nine minutes later, Barty was already there, holding the cloak Marvolo wore over his robes now that the weather was getting cooler. Barty helped his Lord into the cloak and then stepped into the Floo to precede his Lord.

Taking a deep breath, he himself took a pinch of Floo-powder and stepped into the fireplace, calling out his destination, spinning away. He just knew that this wouldn’t be a pleasant day.

ooOoo

Lucius woke in his bed at Malfoy Manor, in his silken pyjamas, covered by silken blankets, his wife Narcissa shaking him by his shoulder. “Lucius, darling, you need to wake up.”

Blinking to wake up properly, Lucius pushed himself upright and settled against the head of the bed. “What is the matter, love? Is something wrong with Draco?” Lucius could not fathom for what other reason Narcissa would wake him in the middle of the night – judging by the darkness outside their window – and a summons from his Lord would have woken him without Narcissa’s help.

“No. The Ministry sent a letter. Bella and the others have fled from Azkaban.” The blonde showed her husband the letter she had opened and read.

Lucius took the missive from her delicate hands, rubbing over his eyes with the other hand, while Narcissa settled under the blankets by his side, her nightgown was not thick enough to keep her warm.

A few words into the official summons to an emergency Wizengamot meeting Lucius was wide awake. “Go back to sleep, love. I will set the wards to their most stringent setting, so only you, Draco, our Lord, and I can enter. I guess the meeting will take most of the day. If it goes on into the night, I will send you an owl.” While he talked to his wife, Lucius went to get dressed in the small dressing room off their bedroom.
When he stepped back out, walking over to the bed to give Narcissa a kiss, he was dressed in one of his better woollen suits and his velvet family robes with the Malfoy Crest. Where he dressed in silk and linen during the warmer months, wool and velvet were his cloth for autumn and winter.

“Try to get a little more sleep, love.” he rested his hand for a moment on her stomach, leaning forward to give her another passionate kiss, “You need your sleep.”

She smiled sleepily up to him, snuggling a little deeper into the covers. “Be careful, my heart.”

With brisk steps Lucius walked down to the entrance hall where one of the house-elves was waiting for him, cloak slung over one of its short arms, the cane balancing on its tip next to it.

“The standing order to always wake Lady Malfoy first if there is reason to do so during the night will be changed from now on. Wake me first. Understood?”

“Yes, Master Lord Lucius, sir. Elfs will wake your first if needed in night,” the little green being squeaked, bowing low and then levitating the cloak so that Lucius could slip easily into it. The wizard took the cane and slipped his wand into its place, before checking his appearance in one of the mirrors hanging on the wall just for this purpose.

After the elf had vanished, Lucius swiftly changed the wards, and then spun on the spot, apparating away just to land a moment later in the big entrance Hall of the Ministry of Magic in London. The big room with its fountain in the middle was largely empty. Only a few other members of the Wizengamot – all looking rather sleepy and a few giving the impression of having dressed in a hurry – and some Aurors were on their way from the Floos and designated apparation points to the elevators to go down to the Wizengamot chamber. Spotting his Lord standing near the public Floos together with the Lords Nott and Lestrange, Lucius walked over, his cane making sharp noises on the tile floor.

“Lord Slytherin, Lord Nott, Lord Lestrange, good… morning.” He bowed and got three small bows and murmured greetings in response.

“I’m not really sure this time of day warrants the greeting ‘good morning’ it is much too early, or rather late, for that,” Benjamin grumbled, clearly unhappy that he was awake and standing in the Ministry.

The Dark Lord gave a small snort. “Let’s not dawdle. Maybe it will be over faster if we are gathered a little quicker.” They all rolled their eyes at this. It was a hope that would never come to pass. Most Wizengamot meetings tended to drag on longer than anyone could wish for, with factions bickering over small issues, and tedious formalities.

The chamber filled only slowly – or at least it felt that way for Lucius – the Lords and Ladies speaking in small groups and Aurors coming in and out to speak with Rufus Scrimgeour and Madame Bones. When Doge finally arrived as the last one, hastily walking to his seat, the small groups dispersed and took their seats as well.

Lucius watched as Amelia Bones, as the head of the DMLE, stood, and the room went quiet. “Ladies and Lords of the Wizengamot, as you already know from your letters, there was a big breakout from Azkaban late yesterday evening. That is, on the evening of Monday the 18th.” She talked in short, clipped sentences, her audience listening with rapt attention. “The exact order of events is, as of now, unknown. These are the few facts we are certain of.” She waved her wand, and a shimmering map of the island and the prison appeared near her.

“The Auror on duty – Albert Simons – was overpowered by a group of at least five wizards after
nine in the evening. When he regained consciousness there was a dead wizard laying on the floor. Simons then managed to raise the alarm while still bound. That is all auror Simons could tell us. His memories are being examined as we speak.”

She made a short pause, before she continued in the same manner. Lucius furrowed his brow. That sounded like a group of wizards had tried to free someone or more than one, and their plan had not worked out.

“A group of dead wizards, both inmates of the prison and as-of-now-unidentified civilians, was found in the hall leading to the guard-room. Two wizards were found unconscious and bound in the hall that held the cell of Bellatrix Lestrange, her husband, and her brother-in-law. All their cells are empty, they could not be found.”

Lucius glanced over to Xerxes. His sons and daughter-in-law had managed to escape, just as their Lord had predicted they would. If it had not been so terribly childish, Lucius would have been tempted to stand up and tell them all, ‘We told you so!’ He could not really imagine how the old man had to feel. Even if his own sister-in-law was the witch that had fled.

“All the intruders' wands were taken, and each Death Eater contained at Azkaban has been freed. The wards are untouched. Those are the facts. Thank you for listening. Any questions?”

And with that the mayhem began.

Marvolo watched as the different members of the Wizengamot jumped to their feet, demanding answers from the Head of Magical Law Enforcement. He stayed sitting, contemplating what little information they had been given. There was little doubt that friends or family of other inmates had tried to use the absence of the dementors to free some of those incarcerated. And it seemed obvious that one of his loyal Death Eaters had managed to get hold of a wand and free the rest.

That still left two rather big questions open. How had those people reached the island, and how had his people managed to leave? He was certain only a few wizards or witches alive could manage to apparate to the island, even if the wards were down. A portkey was not something many could create without risking serious harm to those using them. And certainly his Death Eaters would not have managed either without properly matched wands and in a state of ill health.

He was startled out of his thoughts when the room fell silent and Dowager Longbottom repeated her question, exasperated at his lack of attention. “Was Lord Slytherin involved in this escape? Or can he maybe help tracking those murderers?” Her tone was deadly, and considering that the Lestranges had tortured her son and daughter-in-law into insanity, it was absolutely understandable.

Standing, Marvolo turned a little so he faced Augusta Longbottom – who had come to Hogwarts a few years after he had graduated – and answered her directly. “I understand why one might come to the conclusion I might have been involved in this. But I assure you that I knew nothing about this beforehand. Yesterday evening I spent a few hours' time in the company of one of the Gringotts curse-breakers in the Leaky Cauldron. As for helping to track them, I’m willing to help in every way I can. But I do not know how I should be able to do better than the Ministry is able to.”
Despite his polite and earnest voice Marvolo saw that most of those normally counted under the banner of the light were suspicious of him. But for once, he really was telling the truth. Funny that when he was telling the truth no one believed him, but when he was lying through his teeth, no one doubted his sincerity.

“We know of the Mark each Death Eater wears on one arm. It was obvious that it was intended as a means of communication. Or will you deny it?” Doge remarked snidely.

Marvolo rubbed his eyes. They were asking exactly the questions he had thought they would ask. “Yes, it was designed as a way to communicate. But what could be transferred was limited. And even though the use as a tracker of some sort was one option briefly entertained, the impracticability of such a piece of magic ruled the idea out.” He didn't even try to keep his voice free of how tired he was. He wished he didn't need to explain himself. But maybe he could manage to use this as a way to strengthen his public image.

Lord Tiberius Ogden – uncle to the lesser branch of the family, producing the alcoholic beverage – stood as well and started talking. “I can confirm that tracking spells on more than one object or being at a time can be very disorienting. I experimented with versions of the charm during the work on my mastery. The caster of such a charm – be it temporarily or permanent – is aware of the location of all things under the charm for the whole duration. It can be very disorienting, even with as few as three objects. Only binding the charm to an object – as is done for the trace – would circumvent this problem.” The elderly wizard turned to look at Marvolo, who did the same, maintaining a polite but reserved mask. “And as far as I understand, the Dark Mark was bound directly to the person casting it?”

The wording of this question was nicely done in Marvolo’s opinion. Clearly stating the magical mechanics, pointing out that Voldemort had been the one casting and therefore would have been the one with the split awareness. And while saying that Lord Slytherin would now be the one holding the reins – so to speak – still making the distinction between the legally totally different persons.

Nodding in agreement, Marvolo confirmed Lord Ogden’s explanation. “I clearly remember that trying to track as few as two independently acting beings was too bothersome to even try it on a larger scale.”

Curiosity was evident in the Lord’s voice as he continued the line of thought. “With what beings were these experiments conducted?”

Glad that he had not tried it on humans as the first trial run – that would not work well with his current attempts at a public image – Marvolo answered the question. “If I remember correctly, snakes were the first and only test subjects.”

“Don’t derail the discussion,” Lady Marchbanks snapped from her place, and as one of the elders of the Wizengamot her admonishment achieved instant results. “What would be within your capability, Lord Slytherin?” she wanted to know, squinting a little while scrutinising him.

Tiredly closing his eyes, Marvolo quickly decided what to tell, what he could risk. After all, he did not wish to get his people imprisoned again. His need to protect them was not something he could deny any more. It seemed the Slytherin family magic concerning vassals and their bond to the Slytherin family that he had used in the creation of the Dark Mark had finally made its influence known.

“I could try to summon them. But I doubt that they would answer. They most likely would expect an… unpleasant welcome. Considering the state they probably are in…” he trailed off. Naturally
they most likely would be at his side the moment he summoned them, or as quickly as they could manage. Apparating presumably was not an option for them at the moment, the Floo was not easy to access either, and using the Knight Bus would be idiotic. So it was not exactly a lie.

“Could you summon them now?” Lord Black wanted to know, looking as if he was speculating about something.

Marvolo just ignored the blatant disregard by the young Lord, and shook his head, simply answering with one word. “No.”

“And why not? There were reports back then, that only one of the Death Eaters was needed to call the others. There are several ex-Death Eaters here today.” A sneer adorned the handsome face of the dog animagus as he included the room into a wide sweeping gesture with one arm. “Use one of them.”

Marvolo was getting a headache. He had practiced explaining himself with Henry, but doing so this often in this short a time was hard. And trying to project the cooperative young Lord, trying to redeem himself even if he was legally not responsible, was hard as well.

“You, Lord Black, should be aware that I’m currently working on undoing some of the things that happened… then.” Grey eyes first narrowed and then widened as the man caught on.

Before anyone could say anything more, Lucius stepped forward, drawing all attention to himself. “Do you truly think I would willingly associate with someone who in the past put me under the Imperius curse, without some sort of… compensation?” While he was talking, Lucius opened the cuff of his shirt, rolling the robe and the shirt up his arm to expose the inside. As Marvolo knew it would be, the arm was bare of the Dark Mark, pale and flawless as anything about Lord Malfoy seemed to be.

“As you can see, I have removed what was forced onto esteemed members of our community. I thought this was the most important measure to take and consequently started there.” Marvolo explained, trying to seem contrite and hopeful at the same time.

“So it is gone from all of them?” the incredulous voice of one of the more dimwitted Lords sounded from somewhere Marvolo could not pin down. He rolled his eyes again. He should have pocketed a headache potion before leaving Griffin House. He could use it now.

“No.” He really did try to stay patient, but it was getting harder. “It is magic applied directly to a person – individually – and has to be removed in the same fashion, one by one. As I think no one would have let me visit certain individuals at Azkaban, and most of them took the Mark willingly, I did not try to ask for the possibility. There are other things that are more important right now.” He turned to Madame Bones, trying to get this into a better direction again. “What are the plans to find the escapees?” If he knew what the Aurors were planning to do, he might get to his people before they were captured and brought back to the prison.

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It took several hours of back-and-forth, many questions to all those that were in some way related or associated with the escapees, and the declaration that most of the aurors currently investigating the murder attempt at Hogwarts would be reassigned to search for the prisoners.
Finally they were dismissed for a short breakfast break, which Marvolo used to meet up with Barty under the guise of needing to rearrange some appointments due to the meeting’s likely dragging on for longer.

Marvolo quickly penned a few orders and cast a spell making sure only those bearing his mark would be able to see the real content. “Get this to the Carrows and express my regret at the necessity for moving the appointment. I will help them with their venom-harvesting optimisation another time.”

Barty bowed. “Certainly, my Lord. I will move all other appointments into the next week?”

Marvolo nodded in confirmation and directed his attention to Rufus Scrimgeour, who was purposefully walking over to him. “How may I help you, Auror Scrimgeour?”

The man with his mane of hair huffed. “You can tell me the name of the curse-breaker you claim to have spent most of the evening talking with.”

It was clear as day that the head auror did not believe him. Disappointed at not being trusted, but understanding was the mask he was aiming for as he answered the question. “I was talking with William Weasley. We were sitting in the main room of the Leaky Cauldron, I imagine the owner will be able to confirm my presence there.”

Without a word further, Scrimgeour turned and walked away, leaving a bemused Marvolo standing in the breakroom. The darkest wizard currently alive blinked slowly in surprise – that was not something anyone would have done before that night in ‘81 – before he shrugged it off and walked over to the table laden with breakfast foods.

Next on the agenda was a decision whether to move the Dementors back into control at Azkaban or not. Now they knew that there had been indeed an order and the… things had not acted on their own, it might be possible to move them back. Closing the door after the fox had stolen the chicken. It was idiotic really.

Placing a few small sandwiches with orange marmalade on a plate, Marvolo walked over to the small group of those that could be called his allies to make small talk and brace himself for a long, long, and unpleasant day.

Albus sat in his chair behind the desk in his office. Auror Proudfoot was standing next to one of the visitor chairs, rocking on his feet, likely wanting to pace but refraining.

“I’m sure you understand, Headmaster, that all Aurors are now needed in the search for the escapees.” He made a jerky turn and started to pace. Albus smiled in a grandfatherly manner. Mr. Proudfoot always had thought better when moving. “Of course we will not abandon the investigation into the attack on Heir Slytherin. But we will have to reassign most of the Aurors. Two will remain and start to question the students.”

Albus interrupted the man’s stream of bland explanations. “Will that really be necessary?” He was not happy that Aurors were in the school at all – giving up this much control over the whole mess just felt wrong – but letting them speak with the students was just that step too far.
“Yes.” The auror looked puzzled as he turned from his pacing to the Headmaster, his bright red robes billowing around his ankles. “How else are we to find the one responsible for attempting to kill a student under your care?” The auror sounded as puzzled as he looked.

Albus inwardly sighed. This was another situation where he would look crazy or like he was senile already, if he did not go along with the demands of the other. It was as if the whole world was working against him. Sane Tom was a much harder opponent to fight against. Maybe they would be able to link the man to the escape of his most faithful Death Eaters. He would have to set Nymphadora and Kingsley on this task.

“I will insist that the Head of House of every student you want to speak with is there, and that the parents of any student you want to question is informed beforehand. And the questionings can’t happen during lessons. Can’t impede their education now, can we?” Albus finally demanded in his best grandfatherly tone.

The Auror bobbed his head in confirmation. “Minors can only be questioned when a guardian is present, so this is expected.”

Pleased with this delay – two Aurors working together to speak with the students would have to work slowly – Albus showed the Auror out of his office and then walked down to the staff room. He needed to inform the other teachers.

oooOOooo

Bill walked from the edge of the property to the slightly odd-shaped house he had grown up in. It always felt like home and always would. Even the wards around the perimeter were home to him, now that he was able to sense them more than ever.

His parents had invited him to eat with them this evening. With Percy still sticking close to the Ministry and not willing to admit he had been wrong to doubt the Headmaster about the return of You-Know-Who, Charlie still in Romania, searching for a job in England so he could return home, and all the others at school, their mother was suffering from empty-nest syndrome.

And they surely wanted to hear about his assessment of Lord Slytherin.

When Bill stepped through the door, he could smell the delicious fragrance of the meal his mother was preparing. About to call out for his parents, he heard them walking down from upstairs.

“I can’t believe it, Arthur,” Molly whispered frantically. “That can’t be true. Our William, spending an evening with You-Know-Who? That monster killed my brothers! That diary almost killed my little Ginny! No, I do not believe it!”

Bill went pale. By all that was holy, he had totally forgotten what the man had done! But it was rather easy to forget. Lord Slytherin was a totally different man compared to what he had been told of You-Know-Who.

He closed his eyes, swallowing, as he heard his father’s soothing voice drift down to him. “I’m sure he can explain. And you know how it is at the Ministry. There are rumours in spades, and most of the time it’s rubbish. So don’t just spring it on him when he walks in the door. Yes, Mollywobbles?”
He heard nothing more and assumed that his parents exchanged a kiss. But he himself needed to calm down. He had a good explanation for spending an evening talking to Lord Slytherin, after all.

But he had didn't have any more time to ponder what to say, as both his parents walked into the kitchen.

“Mom, that smells wonderful. What's for dinner?” Bill asked, rubbing his hands together in anticipation and an attempt to distract himself from his uneasiness. He loved his mother’s cooking. Living in his own flat was all very well – it was easier meeting with Fleur not living with his parents – but he missed the meals, and doing his own laundry was not really fun, even with magic.

“I made roast chicken, potatoes, green beans, and Brussels sprouts.” Her smile was shaky, and her hair was a little dishevelled. Why her hair was mused Bill did not want to think about. So he walked over to the table and sat down at one of the laid places that was not his parents' usual spot.

At first they talked about unimportant things. Bill’s flat, the garden, and Molly’s plans what to plant in the next year. When the chicken was finished and the redheaded witch brought out the pudding she had made for dessert, Bill saw the shift in his parents' behaviour. Now was the time, they were about to ask him.

“Bill,” Arthur started to speak “I’m sure you have heard about the Azkaban breakout by now. There was an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot today. And naturally the rumours started right after that. Hopkirk from the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee was the first telling me that Lord Slytherin was asked if he helped them escape. He denied it.” Bill was thrown a calculating look by his mother, while his father had his eyes trained on his folded hands. “And claimed he had been in the Leaky Cauldron all evening eating cake and talking. When asked if there was someone who could confirm this, he supposedly named you.”

Two pairs of eyes – one hazel and on the border of angry, the other blue and pleading – were trained on the pale, sweating Bill, waiting for an answer.

Well, there was nothing for it but jump in at the deep end. “Well, after the meeting in the morning to remove the curse from the Headmaster, I still was unsure what to think of him.” And that was not really a lie, was it? He had been curious and wanted to know more, after all. “So I stayed a little longer, asking questions.” Bill watched, uneasy, the rising anger in his mother – he really hoped to avert one of her infamous lectures, but knew it was probably too late now – and quickly continued speaking.

“So I accepted the offer to meet in the evening. Let him believe I wanted to know more about how the curse came to be.” He shrugged.

“And so you just calmly sat with that monster. The monster that killed your uncles? That monster that almost killed your little sister? Waged war?” With each word the voice of the Weasley matriarch rose higher. “Have you forgotten what devastation and grief that monster brought to our family? How many families suffered because of him?!” By the end she was standing, fists braced on the table, her cheeks red and her eyes blazing with rage and the need to act.

Bill sat in his chair, normally towering over his mother, he now felt like a small child. Like he had felt when he was six and had carelessly knocked over his mom's favourite vase. It had been easy to repair it – magic was handy in that regard – but that had not been the point.

“Tell me! Because at the moment I feel you are betraying the family, William Arthur Weasley!”

Bill swallowed, his mouth as dry as the Sahara. Was he betraying his family? It didn’t feel that
way, but he suddenly was not sure anymore.

“We all want to know what will happen to Harry, right?” Both his parents nodded. “So I tried to get a feel for the man. Right? He seemed polite enough, cooperative, willing to help, even as he was clearly unhappy with the Headmaster. He knows about the laws, and appeared like he wants to keep to them. But it was a short moment. Not nearly enough time to get a better picture of the man.” Bill took a deep breath, he just hoped he was clear and his parents would understand.

“When we met at the Leaky Cauldron he acted polite, as he had at the bank. It was almost like talking to one of the other curse-breakers, or to one of my instructors. Nothing about his behaviour screams evil, insane Dark Lord. I will admit for a while I forgot who he once was… Is it possible that the official story – of the old curse of paranoia – really is the truth? I tried to get him to admit to making horcruxes. He let me know that he knows about them, but did not admit making one, or more. I’m… I’m confused, don’t know what to think.” He turned his eyes on his mother, pleading entering into his voice. “Mom, I love my family, and I never would help someone who had harmed any of my siblings. But… if Lord Slytherin is the man I saw yesterday evening… then maybe, Harry truly is safe with him? I don’t know what to hope for. If the Headmaster is right, then Lord Slytherin is a frighteningly good actor and manipulator. But if the man is genuine, then the Headmaster is either lying to us, or he is losing his marbles.”

It was silent in the Burrow after that. Molly was now as concerned as her son, and Arthur got them all small glasses with fire whiskey. It was indeed an uncomfortable situation they were in. If Albus was right, they had a really dangerous man to deal with, who managed to let others forget their fears even if they were sceptics. And if he was not, then they might just have another equally dangerous man on their hands. Someone in a position of power over many of their children, and with a wider influence than Lord Slytherin currently had.

oooOOooo

In Gryffindor Tower after a long day filled with students unable to concentrate and much speculation, Hermione was trying to distract herself with her new camera. All day, wherever she had gone, whispers and speculation, pointing fingers and stares had followed her.

“I don’t know how you manage to live with this constant… attention!” the bushy-haired witch exclaimed in indignation. She snapped a quick picture of both her friends bending over their last piece of homework for the day.

“I would say ‘welcome to my world’, but I guess that would sound rather cruel. Sorry you have to go through this, only because you are related to Lord Lestrange,” Harry said smiling sadly and then called over to Parvati, “Hey, would you be willing to take a photo of us?”

The Indian girl was only too happy to take the camera from Hermione, taking a picture of the three friends sitting on one of the sagging couches, smiling a little strained, but happy enough.

Hermione had enjoyed her birthday quite a bit despite the bad news. She was hopeful that none of the escaped Death Eaters were animagi and therefore would not be able to sneak into the castle quite as easily as Sirius had during their third year. But with the many changes that had happened since the end of the tournament, it really was going to be a hard year for them all.
Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Revealing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Marvolo had thought long and hard about how to go about this. He had barely slept this night, contemplating the different possible ways to handle the escape of his most loyal Death Eaters and the consequences and side effects each of them would have. Most of all it worried him that they did not know about his change in plans, about the vastly different approach he was using now. And maybe the fact that the boy he had adopted, whom he needed to remain Lord Slytherin – maybe he should find a way to father a child of his own, a sort of failsafe? – was also the boy everyone held responsible for his downfall that night in ‘81. At the moment Henry was relatively safe at Hogwarts – well, at least safe from the escapees – but Marvolo really didn’t want to forbid the boy to go to Hogsmeade.

Taking away even more from the boy somehow felt wrong. Marvolo furrowed his brow. There it was again, a new emotion he could not properly name. In a way, it was similar to his wish to care for the wellbeing of his sworn followers. He was not sure what it was, but thinking of Henry only as a means to an end felt wrong. And not only because the boy also was one of his horcruxes. Maybe if he thought about the fact that another child – son – would give Henry a younger sibling, a bigger family, and some kind of security, because just killing him would not remove the title of Lord Slytherin. Yes, that was a slightly better way to think of it.

But sadly, it was no solution to how to go about having another child, getting a bigger family. He sighed and went back to his original and more pressing train of thought.

So after much deliberation, Marvolo had decided to call first all that had time – it was early in the morning, after all – and then speak with those who could be called his inner circle of advisers. Even if Severus probably had to leave early, it was Wednesday, and the man had classes to teach.

Throwing back and swallowing a potion to tide him over for a few more hours of work – keeping him awake – Marvolo summoned his followers to the house in Scotland.

Moments later the first of them arrived with the cracks typical of apparation, walked up to him, kneeled, and waited until he told them to stand. It was obvious for the Dark Lord that many of the others – especially those in the Wizengamot or part of the Auror corps – had not had any sleep since the early hours of the morning of the previous day.

When five minutes went by without another Death Eater apparating in, Marvolo decided that it was time to begin. Those not there yet probably could not get away from wherever they currently were.

“By now you all have probably heard that those of us incarcerated in Azkaban have managed to escape. All the old safe houses are being monitored, and if one of them were to contact you, bring them here, make sure they get medical attention if needed – food, water – and inform me as soon as possible.” He let his gaze wander over the people standing before him, trying to gauge if there were problems lurking around. “Do not search for them if not ordered to do so. All beside the inner circle and all Aurors, dismissed!” There was no reason to keep his people up longer than absolutely necessary, now that he had reaffirmed the orders he had sent through Barty yesterday.

“Lucius, take the others and get some tea in my study.” The blond Lord bowed and preceded the others of the inner circle on their way to the study for some sandwiches and tea. Severus bowed and vanished out the door with the others, but to go back to the school.
After all but the Aurors had left, Marvolo started to pace up and down in front of them. Finally he started to speak. “Be careful not to risk your position. If you encounter one of my most loyal while in the company of an Auror loyal to the Ministry or Dumbledore, try to make sure they are not killed, but do not risk your cover. Try to be paired with another loyal to me, and if you find one of the escapees, bring them here. Inform those who were not able to attend the meeting of my orders.” Marvolo was of the opinion that he had managed quite well to keep his tiredness out of his voice, trying to sound stern but not angry.

The posture of those standing before him broadcasted their fatigue, even as they tried to mask the fact.

“Go home, rest and get the sleep you need.” Marvolo waved his hand, sending them all away.

On his way to the study, robes billowing behind him, he yawned. Over twenty-four hours of talking and bickering took their toll. And he had not even managed to get into contact with his son. He really had to take a moment to craft two of those communication mirrors.

ooOoo

Lucius and Xerxes were in a quiet discussion over tea and sandwiches when Marvolo stepped into the room, all others were silently focusing on breakfast. Wishing to be done with the planning, Marvolo took his place at the head of the table, levitating the teapot to fill his cup, and adding three spoons of sugar before he started stirring idly.

“Xerxes,” he addressed one of the eldest present, “how do you plan to inform your Heiress about your sons’ and daughter-in-law’s escape?”

“I was planning to visit the school to explain to her how to act and what to expect if she should encounter them. But probably I will not manage before the weekend, so a letter for now. And I plan to hire guards to watch over her if she leaves the castle grounds until they are either captured or contacted,” the other said calmly between sips of tea.

Marvolo nodded. “Getting a guard for Henry too is probably a good idea. All properties known to the escapees, still not under Ministry observation, are under wards reacting to the Mark?”

All around nods were his answer.

Suddenly an idea struck him. Regulus Black had used an elf to thwart his plans, managing to breach all protections and wards around the cave, stealing the locket. All of the escapees were part of old families, how many of those families had one or more house-elves?

With a thoughtful gaze Marvolo tried to remember who of his followers owned one or more elves. In the end it was irrelevant, they all needed to know.

“Have those who were imprisoned still the right to call for elves bound to the respective families?” Confused and surprised looks briefly flashed across the faces of those seated around him before they managed to show the customary mask they all were cultivating around others.

“As long as they were not disowned, they should be able to call for elves bound to the family as a whole,” Lucius explained, his slender fingers folded on the table, probably to keep himself from drumming them. Marvolo knew that it was a nervous habit of the blond Lord. He had put the man
under the Crucius in the past for this irritating habit.

“Make sure all your elves know to respond to calls from our fellows and then report back to you with the place they can be found, or the escapees themselves,” ordered Marvolo. “And assure the Ministry that you are willing to assist in any way possible.” More tired nods all around the polished table answered him. “And now go home, rest, and keep in touch with any news.”

All his Death Eaters recognized a dismissal when one was given, they rose from their chairs, bowed low with a murmur of “my Lord”, and left.

Rubbing his eyes, feeling the last effects of the potion he had taken before the meeting leaving him, Marvolo stood, his destination Griffin House and his warm and comfortable bed.

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The fragrance of freshly baked bread, hot bacon, and freshly brewed coffee greeted Arthur as he stepped into the kitchen the morning after their disturbing talk with their eldest son. In the same moment he sensed that his wife was troubled by something. The way she moved, the rigid set of her shoulders and back, all spoke of uneasiness.

As he had to leave for work soon, Arthur sat down at the table, filled a cup with the strong coffee, added a splash of milk, and thought about how he could get Molly to talk to him.

Conscious of the short time and the fact that talking plainly worked best most of the time, Arthur decided to just ask. “Mollywobbles, talk to me, darling. What bothers you so?”

A sigh was his answer as his wife of many years turned from the bowl mixing something on its own to face her husband. Worry was etched into her features. “I’m worrying about William.” She wrung her hands, her wand sticking out of her apron pocket.

Arthur was surprised – why would Molly worry about their oldest son? – and it coloured his answer. “But why, love? He’s here, back home, or close enough. He has work, and found a girl. What is there to worry about?”

The red-haired witch did not stop wringing her hands in front of her, her eyes gaining a dangerous glint. “I can’t stand the thought that that bastard spent an evening talking with our son!” She spat the word, and Arthur wondered again what had changed Molly’s perception of Lord Slytherin. She had been fairly polite on the evening they had celebrated Harry’s birthday at their home.

The head of the house blinked owlishly, then frowned. “Darling, what changed between Harry’s birthday party and now? It’s the same man, we always knew he had done horrendous things.”

Arthur felt a little lost.

Molly started to pace, her arms held rigid and straight at her sides. She was almost growling now. “We didn’t know he had split his soul. And it was Harry’s birthday, he needs our support. But now, Bill being alone with that monster, discussing curses and Dark magic, of all things.” She threw her hands in the air unable to express herself and her anger, fear, and worry in any other way.

Understanding dawned for Arthur while he took a sip from his coffee, noticing it still was a little too hot to drink safely. “Molly, I know what is said about that kind of magic, but I have never heard of a curse-breaker trained by the goblins falling for the dangers and into the Dark. Bill
knows the risks. Please don’t worry yourself into exhaustion.” He wished he could walk over to his love and embrace her, taking her worries away. But he knew better. When she was like this, she needed to pace off her nervous energy or she was prone to lash out. The last time that had happened – after the twins had exploded their room with an experiment gone spectacularly wrong, worrying their mother half to death – they’d had to work two days straight to set the kitchen back to rights.

“He’s just much too interested in curses. I never liked that fact, and now... an evening with that monster.” Her hazel eyes were fixed pleadingly on Arthur, asking him to tell her she was wrong with her fears. But Arthur knew that it made no difference what he said, getting her to let go of her fear would take longer than he had right now.

“Bill is his own person, not wishing harm on innocents, working to remove dangerous magic from objects and places. He knows of the dangers and how to avoid them. We asked him to see if he could find out if Harry is in danger from Lord Slytherin. He did as we asked, love. There is no imminent danger.” He tried to smile reassuringly, watching as Molly slid into her role as mother and caretaker, dishing him a plate full of food, placing it before him and joining him at the table.

They were silent while they ate their meal, Arthur contemplated his wife’s concern. It was true William was interested in Dark magic, but he had always felt it was more an academic interest, one born out of the wish to protect his family and younger siblings, not out of the wish for control or power. He hoped that he had not misjudged the situation.

Breakfast at Hogwarts was tense. A new edition of the Daily Prophet brought more news into the castle, and many a student ignored the delicious breakfast in favour of gossiping with their peers.

Harry had read the front page and a few sentences of the articles further in the back. The names of all those that had been killed were listed, as were those of their remaining families. More than one story clearly intended to appeal to the gossiping masses, foregoing the attempt to give worthwhile information.

“Useless gossips,” the green-eyed young wizard muttered under his breath. Hermione, on his right side, nodded in agreement and took an apple out of a bowl in front of her. “Have you heard from Lord Slytherin?” his best female friend and companion in being gossiped about wanted to know.

“No. But I guess the Ministry is taking up all his time. With who he once was and all...” Harry trailed off, wondering if he really was defending Marvolo Slytherin, formerly Tom Marvolo Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort. He shook his head and took his daily potion, quickly drinking a goblet of milk to get rid of the taste.

“Neville, are you well?” Ron asked from next to Harry of the other boy, sitting a little bit farther down from the trio of friends.

The blond boy looked up from the plate in front of him, eyes burning with impotent rage, his eyes flicking to Hermione and back to Ron. “No, not really,” was the sullen reply. “Hermione, has Lord Lestrange told you about his sons? Have they been removed from the family?” Harry was surprised by the quiet intensity in the other’s voice. Most of the time Neville was almost too timid. This reaction was maybe the reason he had been sorted into Gryffindor.
The bushy-haired witch squirmed a little uncomfortable on her seat. “Yes, he did talk about them. And they were not thrown from the family. You see…” she hurried to say, noticing the rising anger in their friends’ eyes, “Once someone is cast out of the Lestrange family, no descendants of theirs will ever be a part of the family again. Not three, not ten, not a hundred generations later. As Uncle Xerxes had hoped that one of his sons had a bastard somewhere – so there was a chance of an heir to be found – he only thought about throwing them out very briefly.” She looked sheepishly down on her hands wrapped around each other in her lap, and then braced herself. With determination in her eyes she looked up and over to Neville. “We know about the damage House Lestrange has caused House Longbottom, but I hope that we will be able to move on from the past into a brighter future?”

Knowing from the seemingly endless lessons from this summer that here was something important happening, Harry stopped Ron from interrupting the moment. The red-head's baffled look was answered by a slight shake of a raven-haired head and a finger raised to Harry’s lips. They were witnessing the tentative steps towards a possible alliance between the Houses of Longbottom and Lestrange. One counted among the light Houses for a very long time, the other regarded as dark for an equally long period. If Neville and Hermione could manage to bridge that gap, there might be a chance for more balance in their world.

“As long as those responsible find no refuge in the halls of House Lestrange, I will not hold the whole responsible for the actions of individuals,” Neville finally said and the artificial formality vanished with a filibuster firecracker going off over where the Weasley twins were sitting.

Judging by the looks on Hermione’s and Neville’s faces, they were quite happy with the agreement made between them, while Ron clearly would need an explanation, which would probably fall to Harry.

Harry sighed as he saw an enraged Umbridge walk down from the head table to where the twins were making their escape, it was going to be another long, awful day.

ooOoo

In one out-of-the-way corner in the Gryffindor common room, two boys sat bent over parchment scrolls, working on their homework. Today the two Aurors still at the school had started to question students. It was slow going, as the Headmaster insisted that no lessons be disrupted. He further insisted that the Aurors would only be allowed to speak with the students when their Head of House was present.

“Don’t panic!” Cormac whispered to his friend. “There’s no reason for them to suspect us. Stick to the story, and everything will be fine. We were in the classroom next to that tapestry of the frolicking lion cubs, practicing for transfiguration.” Brushing some stray blond hairs out of his face, Cormac leafed through the book placed on the table between them in search of the information he needed for their essay.

“It’s not that easy, Cormac! They have memories, most have better stories where they have been, they know we don’t like him,” the other all but whined, fiddling nervously with his quill.

Cormac rolled his eyes. His father would not let anything happen to him, he was sure of that. And it was almost impossible for them to be found out at all. As long as his friends stuck to their story. Maybe he needed to find something to reassure them that there was no risk. But what? For the time
being, Cormac started to relate some story about his summer involving a broom and a beautiful girl.

ooOoo

In the evening after Hermione’s birthday, they all sat together with Colin in the seats next to the fireplace in the common room. They had the best light here, and they needed the light. Hermione was examining the camera she had been given by her uncle – and keeping her mind away from the dark looks and comments that had been directed at her all day – peppering the younger Gryffindor for answers. Cameras and photography were Colin’s expertise among the Gryffindors.

“Much is similar between the wizarding photos and the muggle ones. But the film is different. It’s prepared with a certain potion which reacts to the light and later to the potion used for development. I find it a rather clever way to get the people in the pictures to move!” Colin was excited. And Harry understood perfectly. Normally all of their housemates would avoid talking with him about his hobby and passion, and here the small mousy-haired wizard was explaining magical photos to the smartest witch of the whole house.

“If you want me to, I can tell you something about shutter speed, focus, picture composition…” Colin prattled on and on while Hermione asked many questions, taking note of the literature Colin was recommending. Harry tuned the conversation out – even if it was not uninteresting to hear about how taking good pictures worked – contemplating the fact that he had gotten a letter from Marvolo this evening.

His guardian had reassured him that he had not been involved in the escape of those Death Eaters, but that he was trying to contact them to prevent them from doing anyone any harm. Of course the letter had been written in the flowing lines and flourishes of Parselscript and only communicated under the family vow. So Harry was not able to tell anyone, but he felt better nonetheless. If Marvolo had not freed them himself, Harry had not miscalculated in this aspect. And that the man tried to contact those people boded well.

Harry was not dumb, far from it, so he had been aware that Marvolo Slytherin still was in contact with those that had been – or still were – Death Eaters. They had sent him presents for his birthday, he had lived in the house of one of them, his healer was one, one of his professors was a Death Eater, and he was sure that Marvolo had held more than one meeting during the summer.

But in the end it did not matter, because Harry was certain that Voldemort would not return to the way he had been before his body had been destroyed. Lord Slytherin might share some traits with the Dark Lord Wizarding Britain had known before, but he was not the same.

Ultimately it confused Harry to no end how to deal with this, but he was sure of his facts regarding the actions of many key players, past and present.

Rubbing his hand over his eyes under his glasses, Harry watched as Colin got up to walk over to his friends to finish some piece of homework.

Hermione turned to him smiling a small smile. “You got a letter from your guardian?” she asked of him, casting a glance around, looking to see if someone was listening in.

“Yes. And you got a letter as well? Was it from Lord Lestrange?” Harry confirmed and asked in
Ron lowered the Quidditch magazine he had been reading to listen to them.

“It was from Uncle Xerxes,” the young witch nodded. “He assured me that I was the Heiress no matter what, and that I would have guards with me should I leave the grounds of Hogwarts.” She sighed. “I guess we’ll have shadows on the first trip down to Hogsmeade this year.”

“Not if the Ministry catches them soon,” Ron stated confidently, but Harry was not so sure of that. Before the Ministry’s Aurors were likely to get their hands on the escaped Death Eaters, they probably would be found by their own. And to keep up appearances, they both would be burdened with guards. But he was pretty sure he could not simply tell Ron something like that. Even if the family oath would not prevent him from telling.

So he simply shook his head. “I’m not so sure, Ron. They haven't managed to get them by now, and I guess they only will get stronger the longer they're away from the prison. We know that Sirius improved greatly once he away from that place.”

Ron nodded, conceding the point with a sour expression. “Let’s hope for the best.”

Yes, that was what they had to do, hope for the best and try to stay clear of all those unhappy with two Gryffindors as heirs to two old families most associated with the conservative parts of society.

While Ron started on his reading again, Harry helped Hermione in her Herculean task of writing all the thank-you notes she was required to send. He could vividly remember the pain in his writing hand after he had finished with his notes after his birthday.

ooOoo

Ron watched over the edge of the last edition of his favourite Quidditch magazine as Hermione and Harry started going over the overly long list of presents Hermione had received. They were organizing who was to get a short note and who was required to get a longer letter.

Just barely the red-haired wizard managed to keep his scoff on the inside.

All this posturing, all those silly customs, he could not really understand how his best friends had come into a position to have to observe things his parents never held to be of any importance.

The way Harry had tried to explain it earlier had been difficult to process, too. Family magic was why Hermione could not tell them more about why the people who had tortured Neville’s parents into insanity had not been thrown out of the family, disinherited, declaimed. Of course he had heard stories about family secrets that were guarded fiercely. But he had always associated that kind of thing with how brooms were made, or his mother’s cooking. Not magic that said who was part of a family. It was really strange to define by magic who was or was not part of the family. Such nonsense. He was glad his family had done away with this old-fashioned way of going about things.

But he was not really sure how he felt about all of the other stuff. He knew that Harry would stay his friend, regardless of what other responsibilities he had now. Ron knew that Harry didn’t like the fame, the expectations, even so he had trouble believing it – he himself would do almost anything to be able to step out of the shadow of his brothers – but Harry had repeated it often
It had to be true. Considering what negative attention had come Harry’s way – the pranks, the attempt to kill him – Ron was finally sure that he would not like to trade places with Harry. But now Hermione had her place in the spotlight as well, besides her tendency to impress the professors, and he – Ron – was pushed even farther to the sidelines. The attention put on her was negative as well, that had been rather clear over the course of the day. Some mocking her with comments about how she would be cast aside now the true heir had fled the prison, others claiming she somehow had been involved in the plot to break the Death Eaters free.

Ron was not really sure what he wanted, now that he had such a prime view of what it meant to be famous. Maybe he could find something to make an impact, something to make him different from all his older brothers. But for now he would try to be a good friend to both Harry and Hermione. They could use someone not belonging to Slytherin to keep their feet firmly on the ground. He certainly could at least manage that much.

For a change of scenery and a little bit of relaxation, Marvolo made his way into the city after sleeping until Nagini had had enough and made sure he would wake. He had send her hunting on the grounds of Potter Manor – to be woken by a cold snake slithering under the warm blankets was not pleasant – and then apparated into the small yard behind the Leaky Cauldron.

After he had applied a strong notice-me-not charm, he tapped the stones of the wall in the pattern that had not changed since his first trip into the alley. Today the place was packed with people, and they were talking, dallying on their errands to exchange gossip. It seemed that the most recent news had sparked the need to speculate and air their opinions.

Walking in a leisurely pace, Marvolo listened in on various conversations.

“I told you that nothing good would come of this! Only one Auror as a guard! Totally foolish!” one man ranted only for the witch at his side to answer, “Yes dear, you have already said so three times since this morning. And as I said before: I agree!”

A group of elderly wizards was discussing what they remembered of the trials that had been held back then, claiming to have always known that the walls of Azkaban would not hold them.

The next group recounted the escape of Sirius Black, and were so far off the mark that Marvolo had to suppress a snort. The idea that the newly appointed Lord Black had flirted with a Dementor to get an opening to flee was just too ridiculous.

With a little bit of regret – it was fun to listen in on the conversation of the normal wizard from the streets – Marvolo stepped into the Magical Menagerie. He planned to purchase a snake to gift to the school Xerxes was still working on. It would be a perfect thing to have in the science classroom. Marvolo still was intrigued by the idea of teaching more muggle science, biology, and physics, as well as chemistry. Maybe they would be able to broach new areas of magic if they got another point of view on the mechanics of the world.

As always the shop was filled with numerous scents – not quite clean litter boxes, different foods, stale water like a pond in the middle of summer, wet dog – and sounds. But as the walls were
packed with different cages, and the owner was not as meticulous in using charms to keep the place clean as he should be, Marvolo did not expect anything else.

Lifting the notice-me-not charm to avoid anyone from bumping into him in the narrow pathways of the shop, Marvolo quickly made his way past rats, cats, a tortoise with a shell encrusted in gems, into a corner shielded from direct view from the door.

.:Hello lovelies:. Marvolo hissed to the lazily resting snakes, curled on stones charmed to emit a comfortable warmth. Coils unwound and small heads were raised. There were a few interesting specimen here, but he had come for a native snake. The curriculum for Biology was built around the native plants and animals of Britain, so a native snake it should be.

The sleepy and content animals hissed different replies, inaudible for the average wizard or witch, only understood by those with the gift of parseltongue. Glamoured eyes wandered over the terrariums searching for one snake patient enough to endure life surrounded by curious children.

He spotted a melanistic-coloured common adder making its way from the stone in the farthest corner to the small basin of water in the front. The snake was beautiful. He would ask, and if it was agreeable, this would be the one.

.:Hello, my friend:. Marvolo addressed only the one snake.

.:Hello, speaker:. was the reply of the snake lifting its head curiously.

.:What would you say if I offered to take you to another place? Bigger terrarium, nice live mice to hunt, a warm place to rest, fresh water every day. How does that sound?:.

.:What is the catch?:. the snake wanted to know, its head now level with Marvolo’s eyes where he crouched in front of the terrarium positioned slightly below hip level.

The Dark Lord in hiding smirked. Trust a snake to catch on to the hidden dangers. ..:.There will be young humans around, watching for the most part. And I would like for you not to attack them:..

.:But I get to hunt? Will not have to live off dead prey dumped into the area?:.

.:Yes, you will get to hunt:. It was an easy enough promise to make. Withholding fun from an animal in captivity was not something he approved of. Quite ironic when he thought about it. Withholding food and comforts from human prisoners was one of his go-to methods of breaking them, but he would not treat an animal that way.

.:Then I agree to go with you, speaker:. the snake decided, and began its slow way over to the entrance to its transparent prison.

The small ward keeping customers from opening the cages was easily broken, and the snake wound its way around Marvolo’s arm, before the wizard turned and made his way back to the front of the store and the counter to pay for the animal.

No vendor stood at the front so Marvolo made the bell ring with a small brush of magic, alerting whoever was in charge that there was a customer willing to pay for a part of their goods.

“Coming! One moment please,” a wizard called from a back room, or so Marvolo assumed as the voice came through an archway covered by brightly coloured curtains.
Only a few moments later a wizard in sturdy robes of a more practical than fashionable cut came through the archway, plastering a smile on his face and turning to the counter and the more or less patiently waiting Marvolo.

The parselmouth saw the moment the other wizard recognized him as Lord Slytherin, former terrorist madman, now member of the Wizengamot, standing there, waiting. With forced calmness the man gave a small bow. “How may I be of service, Lord Slytherin?”

For a moment Marvolo wondered why the man asked – he had a snake on his arm after all – until he realized that the dark-coloured snake would not show up against his equally dark robes. They were not black but a deep, dark green, giving ample cover for the reptile hiding in its folds.

“I would like to purchase this common adder,” Marvolo answered holding his arm more towards the man, over the counter, to point out his passenger to the man.

With wide eyes – either in fear of the venomous snake or anger that he had taken a snake without asking – the wizard got out his wand. “You can’t simply take one of the animals out of their cages! That’s a dangerous snake! One bite and I would have to call the healers! Of all the irresponsible things to do.”

Marvolo could not repress a chuckle. The flustered wizard just looked too comical. “No need to be so frantic. The snake would not attack me.” And without pause he switched to Parseltongue.: Or would you harm me, pretty?:. The small head moved so one eye could look up at the wizard holding the snake.: Why should I harm a human providing me with food?:.

A pale-faced wizard stated the sum of ten sickles as the price for the snake and barely managed to ask if Lord Slytherin wanted to purchase a terrarium or any other supplies for his new pet. Marvolo declined with a small smirk and turned to leave.

His next stop would be a shop for odds and ends in Knockturn Alley. He needed two simple but stable mirrors. Best would be some out of metal, as the runes needed would be more durable in this material.

Listening to more gossip and speculation, Marvolo meandered the streets, speaking in low hisses with the adder still on his arm.

oooOOooo

They apparated directly to the front door of the house Sonja was living in. She had rented a flat here, as she had told Severus in the break between acts of the play they had seen this evening.

Severus was in his finest muggle clothes, and Sonja wore a wonderful flowing dress made from silk under a cape of velvet. And even without trying, they had managed to colour-coordinate their outfits. Both were in tones of green and blue, making a fine picture.

The evening had been a success. Severus had shown up at Sonja’s door bringing with him a small bouquet of flowers useful in potions. He had gathered them in the greenhouses and the forest himself, and was sure his date would like them.

After that they had moved on to the theatre by a muggle taxi. The play had been wonderful, and the food and drinks they had enjoyed in a little bar afterwards had been really good as well.
Sonja had made no fuss over Severus’ paying for everything – it was an old custom in the wizarding world that the male part of a first date paid everything – smiling and flirting with him all of the time.

But now on the last steps before he would leave, he started to get nervous. His stomach felt as if he had swallowed a swarm of doxies, and only long practice kept him from letting his nervousness creep into his voice.

Should he try for a kiss? Or was it still too early for such a move? Custom dictated that intimacies should not occur before marriage. But as Sonja had been at a Muggle school, had visited the cinema regularly with friends – she had confessed to liking to watch love stories for how unrealistic they were and how romantic – she might have other expectations.

The way she had flirted and bantered with him did indicate that she was interested in him, as he was interested in her. But he did not really have much experience in this area of social interaction. Dancing with the wives and older daughters of his associates, he knew how to do that. He also knew how to speak with single women he was not interested in. But it had been a long time since he’d had any serious designs on a woman, beyond an evening spent in mutual pleasure, he never had searched for a lasting relationship.

And now he found himself in a situation where he was ordered to marry, have children, and where he had found a woman he could imagine spending his life with.

He never would have thought that possible even half a year ago.

He did not wish to ruin his chances because he was too brash in his actions or too hesitant.

They reached the door and turned to face each other under the warm glowing light floating over their heads.

“Thank you for a very nice evening, Severus. I haven't had this much fun in a long time.” She smiled up at him, her eyes reflecting the light in a mesmerizing way.

“I have to thank you for allowing me to invite you, lovely Sonja.” He was getting sweaty hands from nervousness, how ridiculous!

Before he could manage to think himself into a corner, Sonja rose on the balls of her feet, placing one of her hands on Severus’ chest to keep her balance, leaning in for a kiss. As this could not be misinterpreted, Severus closed the small gap between them and kissed Sonja tenderly, wrapping her into his arms.

Quite some time later the both of them parted again, cheeks flushed and eyes bright.

“I hope I see you soon, Severus,” Sonja said, winking up at him and turning to vanish into the house.

Dazed, Severus stood before the door a few moments longer, before turning to apparate back to the gates of Hogwarts.

He was still shocked and pleased over Sonja’s decision to take the initiative. On his own he would probably have caused a terrible disaster. Still smiling he went to bed, the next day would bring more dunderheads and cauldrons in danger of exploding.
Albus was once again on one of his missions he never told anyone anything about. Alastor was not happy about it, but suspected that those missions were somehow linked with the horcruxes they had been told about. At least Albus had seen reason and accepted the help of that bastard Riddle. Now he was no longer dying, improving their chances at success considerably.

In an effort to catch the escaped Death Eaters, all of the Order had been called together in their headquarters to discuss plans. Tonks and Shacklebolt had come, as had the Weasleys, the no-good Fletcher, Diggle, and most of the others. Snape was missing, claiming to have another engagement he could not reschedule. Alastor had his doubts, but kept mostly silent about them.

He had been pacing up and down, his peg-leg making hollow sounds with each step, a big map was suspended in the air, showing all houses and places they had known of during the last war. They were trying to manage a schedule to monitor the houses, but there were simply not enough people.

“Alastor,” Shacklebolt said in a tired tone of voice, “there are simply not enough of us to manage monitoring all those places alone. And we all have other work to do.”

Tonks nodded, her hair this evening a garish yellow colour. “And I’ve seen the map they have at the department. I don’t think we know of any places that the Ministry is not aware of. If we listen in on their monitoring, we should be able to act.”

The curse-breaker Weasley – Bill was his name, probably. It was a big family – bend forward, letting his gaze wander over the assembled wizards and witches. “Why don’t we set up some kind of ward, something small and insignificant? When tripped it can alert us, with a small charm as the focus, or something along those lines. It would free us up for other things.”

General murmurs approved of the idea, and reluctantly Alastor nodded. It was not the best solution, and not the one he would have preferred, but they all had a point, they just were too few to cover all those places. Even when they eliminated those that were farther away from Azkaban, there were still too many.

After a few more hours of discussion, they agreed upon a specific ward and who would hold the monitoring anchors for which places. Bill had volunteered to place the wards and had received a map with the locations marked. He would start immediately after the meeting, so they closed their exchange of ideas and went their separate ways.

The week had been hard. Each day brought more speculation about the escaped Death Eaters and what they might be doing. The constant murmuring behind Harry’s and Hermione’s backs was getting on both of their nerves.

Today was Saturday, and they had hoped for a little bit of rest and quiet by avoiding the Great Hall and most of the student population. But on their way to the kitchens, Hermione had spied Lord Lestrange standing in the entrance hall, obviously looking for someone. Harry had gone with his friend to greet the Lord, and after that had left the two of them alone. He supposed the man had come here to talk to his heiress, and Harry himself had an appointment with his mind-healer later in
the day. And right after that, he would meet with Snape for another lesson in Occlumency.

So he opted to go to the Great Hall for breakfast before meeting with Theo and a few of the Slytherin’s friends to study in the library. Luna Lovegood – who was in the same class for Ancient Runes as Harry – would be coming too. It was funny, but he got more time to actually study when he was with the Slytherins. He supposed it had something to do with the fact that Lord Slytherin had adopted him, that the man still was revered as the Dark Lord by most of the Slytherins’ parents, and that he himself was now the heir of Slytherin.

His life had become a comedy show.

In the early afternoon Harry packed his now-finished Runes essay, waved adieu to his friends from Slytherin – at least Theo and Daphne counted as friends in Harry’s book by now – before he left to meet with Mrs. Goyle in the private room off the infirmary.

Only the tomcat was missing, the furniture resembled what Mrs. Goyle had in her rooms, and all the art supplies were there as well.

He was greeted by a smiling Mrs. Goyle indicating a seat for him to take. “I understand that the last week has been rather stressing. As has the whole term so far.” As always she sounded collected, kind but not artificially sweet.

Harry only nodded. No single year until now had started out with such a constant barrage of dangerous situations.

“How does that make you feel?” It was a standard question to start a session, and always the one Harry found the hardest to answer.

For a long moment Harry wrestled with his mind to get the right words to express his feelings, even to get himself to comprehend the maelstrom of emotions.

“Do you think using paint would help you express yourself?” This was a frequent question asked in their sessions as well.

Harry nodded and walked over to the easel, picking up a brush, contemplating for a moment which colours to use and what to paint. Finally he set to work mostly using black, white and some of the darker blues and greens.

Half an hour later Harry felt calmer than he had since breakfast Tuesday morning. He took a few steps back looking over the work he had finished.

Mrs. Goyle stood from her chair, from where she had been watching, and came over to take her look herself. “Looks like you’re overwhelmed with current developments. You’ve used a lot of grey in the picture, can you tell me why?”

They walked back over to the comfortable chairs, turning them so they could keep looking at the picture now drying, sitting down to talk.

Harry contemplated for a moment and started to speak. “When I was younger, it all seemed rather easy. There were always the good and the bad people. The few stories I read, the series I sneaked a look at when Dudley was too distracted. There were always the good and the bad.” Harry took a sip from the water that always was on hand – talking made him thirsty – before he continued. “And from when I first came into contact with the wizarding world, until this summer, it was the same. There were the Death Eaters and Voldemort, the ultimate villains. And then there were my parents, their friends, and Dumbledore, good guys, heroes. The world was easy. Gryffindors were the
decent students, Slytherins bullies and cheats. But this summer, the clear lines started to blur.”

Harry rubbed his eyes under his glasses. “I was adopted, learned all I had to know to fulfil the role I should rightfully hold once I’m old enough, learned that the Headmaster had lied to me and manipulated me. On the other hand, the man that had killed my parents took me into his care, got a healer to look at me, made me see you… There are no clear lines anymore!” The last he almost shouted, running his hands through his hair in frustration.

“Life certainly is easier when you can make clear-cut lines,” remarked Mrs. Goyle, nodding in Harry’s direction. “Do you feel such a view on the world is accurate? Are all people easy to categorize?”

Harry knew from experience that these questions were leading him to think for himself over many aspects of his life, what he was thinking about the world, and his role in it. An obvious tactic, but one that helped him find a way to deal with the world.

“No, I don’t think people are so easy to sort. Snape – Professor Snape,” the boy quickly corrected himself, “is a good example for that. He’s saved my life more than once, but his behaviour is some of the foulest I’ve ever seen.”

They started a discussion on things blurring the lines of what Harry had believed to know about the world before this summer. Mrs. Goyle suggested he might try a diary to help him clearing up some of his confused thoughts, using sketches together with words if they would help him, or finding someone he could talk to more often than he could talk with her.

As her idea to address Marvolo by different names for the version before and after the adoption had worked rather well – Harry now saw more differences between the two entities than common traits – he decided to give it a shot. Maybe he could get a diary and dedicate a page or two to sketches to find the different good and bad traits of the people who were part of his life.

It was another hour later that Harry left the room, said goodbye to his mind healer, who followed the smaller Professor Flitwick out of the castle to be apparated home, and went down to the dungeons to make it in time for his next Occlumency lesson.

They were covering it up as remedial potions, continuing the guise so the Headmaster would not learn that Harry was being instructed in how to shield his mind.

Harry was nervous, as he had been every time before these lessons, but he felt confident too. He had kept up with his meditation exercises every night in his bed. Some days it worked better, some days it was harder, but most of the time he relaxed enough that he fell asleep almost without problem. He hoped it would help keep Snape away from the more embarrassing memories in this lesson.

And after that he hoped he could manage to get Hermione on her own to ask what Lord Lestrange had come to talk to her about.

Chapter End Notes

I want to add that I have no experience with “mind healing” in any fashion and I make everything up as I go along. All I know for sure that it is always good to get help if you need it, and to ask a professional if you need help, if you are not sure. Better ask
too often rather than not at all.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Rabastan let his gaze wander over the sorry bunch of humans they were. It still felt like a miracle that they had managed to start that muggle contraption and to point it in the right direction. At one time Travers almost fell overboard and into the water. Getting seasick was not something magic made one immune to. And they had no potions to take. So the wizard had been hanging over the side, retching despite his empty stomach. An unexpected lurch almost made him fall. Only Rodolphus' quick reaction preventing it from happening. They had been much more careful after that.

Now they were all sitting in a sparsely lit sitting room, gathered around the fire they had made in the fireplace – they all craved the warmth – waiting. In a small pot – it had been in one of the cabinets in the kitchen – now sitting in the fire were heating the contents of one of the many containers with pictures of food on the outside. They had found them in what appeared to be a pantry.

They had been really lucky finding this summer or vacation home near where they had landed with the boat. In a way, it reminded Rabastan of a hunting cabin they owned up in Norway. Simple but serviceable bath, a kitchen, a sitting room with a fireplace, several bedrooms. It seemed like it was only intended for use during the summer and had been abandoned for this season.

After testing the wands they had acquired and switching a few around until each of them had the best fit they could find in the lot, they had managed to cast some basic Muggle-repelling charms and started to search the place. When they had found the food, water, and beds, they had decided that this was as good a place as any to stay a while and rest. The fact that the Dementors had been absent quite some time before their escape had helped them even manage as much magic as they had needed to come this far. But now they needed to rest and regain more of their strength before they could act.

Rabastan was happy that they had managed to take a bath and had found clean clothes. He felt more human than he had in years. He watched as the soup started to heat, steam rising from its surface. A small smile curled his lips as he remembered the first can they had tried to heat. One of them – he had not paid enough attention at the time to remember who it had been – had cast a heating charm at the sealed tin, and after a few moments the hot content had exploded from the container, splattering against the wall and the furniture behind which they all had taken cover. After that they had used a fire in the fireplace and the small pot to heat their food.

“We should contact our Lord,” the distinctive voice of Bella stated from a chair over at one of the windows.

More than one annoyed wizard rolled his eyes at this. The witch had demanded that they call for their Lord via the Dark Mark more than once by this point. Rabastan always had thought that his sister-in-law was a few phials short of a full set, and it appeared that the time they had spent in prison had not helped any.

Rookwood – who had taken to leading the group – stood to distribute the soup and addressed the impatient witch with a stern explanation. “Bellatrix, I will repeat again: we are in no shape to be of any service to our Lord at the moment. And we have not enough information to make any moves. Eat your soup, sleep, rest, practice with your new wand. But do not go outside!”
Dark brown eyes glared at the man who stood with his back to the room filling several mismatched bowls and plates with soup, handing them out. With a huff Bella accepted a bowl of her own, while trying to secure her matted locks behind one ear. She had declined the use of some scissors they had found to cut her hair and had tried some hair care charms instead. They had failed and left the once so silky black locks in even more of a tangle.

Most of the men sported rather shaggy hair at the moment. A few had even opted to shave their heads in an attempt to rid themselves of parasites that had made their home in the mess their hair had become in prison. Not one of them knew the spells normally used for such things, as not one of them had had need of them in the past. The Carrows might actually know how to cast them, but they had decided not to contact any of their old acquaintances. Surely the Ministry would be watching them.

“And how are we going to get information?” Dolohov drawled between spoonfuls of soup. “We can’t exactly walk up to a muggle and ask. And I doubt any of us are in any shape to reach Diagon or Knockturn to get a Prophet.”

“Back before this mess, I just would have sent an elf to fetch me a newspaper,” Mulciber mumbled into his badly groomed beard.

Rabastan looked over to his brother with widening eyes. They each just had had an idea and hope was blooming in the depths of their eyes. Maybe this was the solution to their problem of missing information and the dangers of contacting anyone they might get information from.

Without the use of words they came to the agreement that Rabastan would call their elf, and Rodolphus would restrain his wife if needed. They both were glad that they no longer were separated by walls of stone and the fog of apathy the Dementors forced on all of them.

“Floppy!” Rabastan softly called once he had set down his bowl on a table and had stepped a few paces away from the others. A moment later he was happy that he had taken these precautions.

He staggered as a small green, wrinkly being wrapped his knees in a rather strong embrace, setting his balance off kilter. He did not find it in him to scowl down at the little elf who mumbled quite happily the litany of “Little Master is back. Little Master is back,” over and over.

Ignoring the snort he could hear from one of the others, Rabastan patted the little elf, which had tended to him and his brother since they had been infants, on its head. “Yes, we are back. I have a task for you, Floppy.”

With a little eager bounce the elf released its hold on Rabastan’s knees and stepped back. “Floppy is happy to help. What can Floppy does for little Master?”

Another snort was ignored by the big – if at the moment sickly thin – wizard in favour of explaining what he wanted the elf to do. “Get me a recent edition of the Daily Prophet and bring it here. After that I want to know the state of our family.”

A happily grinning elf vanished with a deep bow and a pop only to be back in the blink of an eye, placing several copies of the most popular newspaper in wizarding Britain on the table. Awaiting eagerly the questions it might be asked, the elf stood beside the newspapers.

The Prophets from the last week – all clearly read before – were quickly distributed among the wizards smirking over the display before them, while Rodolphus walked over to his brother and the elf. He was clearly as interested as Rabastan to hear what the elf might be able to tell them.
Rustling of newspapers being leafed through and murmured conversations became background noise while the tall and broad brothers sat down on chairs turned towards Floppy. “Tell us, Floppy, how is father? Does he know about our escape? Has he given you any orders concerning us?” Rabastan as the elder brother asked.

Floppy was still grinning. “Master Xerxes is well. He worried a little and told Floppy to go if called. Floppy is to tell you to be careful. Ministry wizards watching! Floppy can carry message. Shall Floppy tell Master Xerxes something from little Masters?”

Another quick look was exchanged between the two brothers. “Tell him that we have a safe place to stay in at the moment. But we are eager to get back to our Lord as soon as we can,” Rodolphus said quietly and got a happy nod from the old elf.

Rabastan let his gaze wander over the others reading the newspapers, thinking about what he might ask of the elf. His experience was that the elf heard everything that was said in the Manor, but never was inclined to just tell anyone. The fact that they were surrounded by wizards not belonging to the family would limit what the elf would be willing to tell as well.

“Have you seen the Dark Lord? Or has father talked about him?” This should be a rather innocent question considering the company, nothing too connected to their family, but something they needed to know. Was the Dark Lord really back? The Mark was dark and vibrant again, and they all had felt the summons a few times. But was he really back?

The elf nervously clutched one long ear in a long fingered hand. Tilting its head to the side, Floppy nodded and whispered rather loudly. “He has been to the manor. Lord Slytherin. Master Xerxes talked about him.”

Rabastan got up from the chair to find paper and something to write with. He intended to send a note to his father with the elf. Sending correspondence via elf was always safer than sending it by owl. There was no chance that an elf would be intercepted, and an elf bound to a family and treated decently never would betray their master.

“Have you seen this?!?” Travers exclaimed, holding up the newspaper he was reading. “Lord Slytherin gave a short comment that he had known nothing good would come out of taking the Dementors away from the prison,” the man cited, waving the paper around. “Lord Slytherin! Can that be our Lord?”

“A Lord Slytherin is mentioned in this edition as well,” Rookwood mumbled, his eyes flicking over the page, searching for more information. The man’s eyes widened and he looked over to the Lestrange brothers. “Lord Lestrange is mentioned and his heiress!”

Rabastan started to furiously scribble a letter to his father, trying to not be too obvious about what he was telling and asking. “We certainly need more information!”

Bella huffed in an annoyed tone, but the rest made agreeing noises. They had been out of the loop for a long time, and obviously much had changed. Last Rabastan knew, a female could not be heiress for the House of Lestrange. He scribbled with an awkward pen a steadily longer-growing note before sending it off to his father.

oooOo0oo
Minerva watched as one of her Gryffindors was interrogated by the two Aurors still staying at Hogwarts to investigate the murder attempt on James’ and Lily’s son.

She still had trouble comprehending that at least one of her students was willing to risk grave bodily harm to another student. To admit that the death of a student had been a tolerated consequence was even harder. Even to think it might have been the goal was nearly impossible.

But the Aurors clearly thought of it as a planned murder. To stun someone flying on a broom was foolhardy – Minerva would agree to that – but to think sixteen-year-old students of Gryffindor would intentionally kill someone... She just could not believe that.

“So you were practising for class with your friends?” the Auror on the left asked in a friendly tone and with a kind smile.

Fiddling with the hem of his sleeve the young wizard nodded. “We were practising for transfiguration. In the empty classroom next to that wall hanging with the lion cubs on it.”

“Who else was there?” was the next question.

Minerva watched as the same questions as before were answered again. She was a little proud that her students had been practising for her class, but was not pleased that they had done so in some random empty classroom, and one that was as out of the way as that one.

“How did practising go?” that typically was one of the last questions the Aurors asked. Sighing inwardly that she had sat in on enough interrogations by now to know something like that, Minerva mentally prepared herself for reassuring Mr. Summers on their way back to the tower where she would pick up the next student to be questioned.

“Cormac managed the spell to conjure birds as the first of us. But John only managed a cloud of feathers,” Mr. Summers answered, fidgeting in his chair, clearly wishing he were elsewhere. Minerva mused if he maybe was embarrassed that he had not managed the spell. He always was one of the last to manage a transfiguration in his class.

“Thank you for your time and cooperation, Mr. Summers. Your Head of House will escort you back to the common room.” The Auror in his deep red robes that were the typical uniform for one of his profession turned to Minerva. “If you please could bring Mr. Parker down next, Professor McGonagall?”

Nodding with a pleasant expression, Minerva agreed. “I will be quick.” The list they had given her was almost finished. She was glad it was, because she had quite a number of essays still to grade.

Mr. Summers was quick to get up from the chair, nodding to the Aurors and rubbing his hands on his robes as if he wanted to dry them.

The moment they were out of the door Minerva started with distracting the boy walking beside her with a discussion about the last homework she had set the sixth-year transfiguration class.

ooOoo

“The story was familiar, wasn’t it?” Savage drawled, making notes on a piece of parchment sitting on the table before him.
With a tired smile Thomas stood from his chair to get the kinks out of his back – sitting most of the day on one of those infernal chairs was not good for him – and groaned. “Yes, we have heard that story from the whole group up till now. Think John Parker will tell us the same story?”

“I would bet on it, Proudfoot,” Savage laughed but got serious quickly enough. “Seems we have found our culprits.”

“Don’t be too sure yet, Savage. They certainly want to hide what they were doing. But we don’t have proof that they were the ones attacking Heir Slytherin.” Pacing a few times along the length of the classroom, Thomas loosened his cramped muscles. They needed to find a way to get their hands on some definitive proof.

“That’s right,” Savage conceded. “Do you think we will get permission to extract memories of that time from the boys? After all, that Ravenclaw did fess up to brewing a potion unsupervised. So what could a group of sixth-years have been up to that they don’t want to tell?”

“We just might get permission. It was the heir to one of the old families that was attacked. That fact might make the Wizengamot move.” Normally the Wizengamot was not to eager to allow them the authorization for the more severe methods of investigation, such as that. But now that one of their own was the one that had suffered, the chances of getting the permission they wanted might be better than ever.

He sat down as the Head of Gryffindor came in with a nervous-looking boy in tow. Sometimes Thomas doubted their system. The family you came from, personal influence, and who you knew just had too much influence on how much effort, if any, would be put forth into an investigation. It was nice so long as you had some influence, but he had seen too many go without proper help, so he was not really happy with the way things were handled.

oooOOooo

Wandering a little aimlessly around the circular office filled with seemingly random trinkets, Marvolo continued the polite and empty conversation the Headmaster was forcing on him. The old goat had managed to call him Tom at least three times since he had arrived a few minutes ago. If he had to stay much longer in the man’s presence, he would have to start occluding. Hopefully Henry would make his way up here soon.

Before the Headmaster could up his count of using the name Marvolo despised to a number with two digits, there was a knock at the door. “Come in Mr. …” the Headmaster hesitated a moment, “Slytherin.”

Henry opened the door and stepped over the threshold, giving a small nod to the Headmaster sitting behind his desk, before giving the appropriate bow to Marvolo. “Headmaster. Sir.”

Marvolo smiled. “It is good to see you, Henry.” And it was. Surprisingly so.

“Your guardian wanted to speak with you, Mr. … Slytherin.” The Headmaster turned to Marvolo, who had to control himself so as not to roll with his eyes. The old man had a talent for grating on his nerves. “I offer you my office for your talk.”

Marvolo almost snorted at that offer. As if he would be so dumb to accept the place. Talking with his son under the watchful eyes and ears of several portraits of past Headmasters? Even if they
were to choose to speak in parseltongue, the obnoxious paintings would report every move and expression to the current Headmaster.

“Thank you for your kind offer, Headmaster. But I would like to wander the school for a bit. Won’t you show me around, Henry? It has been a while since I have last seen the castle.” Marvolo declined the offer in the most insincere polite tone he could manage, constantly smiling sweetly and showing too many teeth. It probably was not the best idea he had had in a while, but the man truly was getting on his nerves.

Nodding his head with a polite smile in Marvolo’s direction, Henry answered. “Sure, sir. I would like to wander around a bit myself. A break from sitting around writing essays is a good idea, I think.”

With a few more pointless pleasantries they managed to flee the cluttered office and started to walk at a leisurely pace through the corridors.

:.I came to inform you of what has happened. I guess you have seen the newspaper?:. Marvolo started right on the topic he had come to discuss, sticking to the one language he was sure not one of the paintings would understand and report to the Headmaster. The few paintings with snakes in them would never betray someone from the Slytherin family, and all the others would not hear anything more than hissing.

:.Yes. It stirred up quite a lot of commotion. Lord Lestrange was here yesterday to speak with Hermione about the same,:. Henry hissed in answer, tucking his red and gold striped scarf better around his neck. It had become colder in the castle already.

Marvolo heard the implied question and smiled a little smile. It seemed that a Slytherin was hiding in his Gryffindor son. But considering what the boy’s past injuries implied about his childhood, it might not actually be surprising that Henry had Slytherin tendencies.

:.I know. Xerxes told me of the precautions he is going to take to make sure your friend will be safe,:. Marvolo sighed and stopped at a window looking out over the grounds and over to the pitch. :.As I wrote, I was not involved in the escape. And we have not managed to contact them. So for as long as they are not informed about your new status, you will not leave the grounds without at least two guards,:.

Seeing that Henry started to protest about not leaving the grounds before Marvolo came to the part about guards, made him smile. It seemed that the boy was getting more comfortable with him and their being a family. Openly disagreeing with his father was something normal, or so he had been told by those of his followers with children of their own.

Henry made a face, but nodded. :.Yes, sir,:.

:.How are classes going? I heard quite a few complaints about the current Defence Professor,:. The most important part was communicated – he did not intend to tell Henry the plans made to find and contact the escaped Death Eaters – so now he would try to get up to date with his son’s experiences here at the castle.

Henry furrowed his brow as they turned onto the next staircase. :.I really hope that this Professor will only stay one year like the rest up till now,:. The boy’s steps were getting a little bit quicker and gained an angry force.

:.That bad?:. It seemed that his followers had understated the situation if Henry displayed his
anger at the situation this obviously.

.:She only lets us read that worthless excuse of a book. We never practice anything. And the book is entirely useless. Claiming that there are no situations warranting casting offensive magic, that counter-curses are just curses. And she constantly taunts me. Trying to get me into trouble.:. The boy huffed and Marvolo just had to smirk.

.:So I guess, taking down the curse on the Defence position is one task I should put at the end of my to-do list?:. In fact it had been rather low in his priorities, but he had thought about moving it up, because he didn’t wish to impede his son’s education any more than he already had. Even if he had not planned to do so, his actions had influenced Henry’s education negatively more than once already.

.:Getting rid of her at the end of the year is not soon enough,:. was the especially sharply hissed reply.

.:Do you know of any information that could prove useful to remove her earlier?:. A big part of their political lessons over the summer had been the use of information another might not want to become public knowledge to reach a certain goal. There was a delicate balance to keep, because if you put on too much pressure, the target was likely to react in panic, lash out, or even expose the secrets on his own. When there was no way out, most people tended to lose all sense of logic and just reacted.

On the other hand, if you were clumsy and left too big an opening, the attempt at what could be named blackmail could be turned around on you. It was an art form that needed practice and careful application to be of use.

.:Besides her total incompetence to be a teacher? No, there is nothing I know of:. The green-eyed youth hissed getting a tired look. .:Hermione is concerned that we will not make our OWLs in Defence if the toad remains our professor for the whole year. She insists that it is enough to read theory to be able to cast the spells during the exam for the first time:. That had Marvolo blinking slowly more than once. Casting for the first time during the practical OWL exam? What utter rubbish! Someone really talented might pull that one off. But most children – or even accomplished adult wizards – couldn’t manage something like that under the pressure normal for an exam situation.

.:I will see if I can find a better suited teacher for you and the other students, before we try to get her removed. If I’m right, she was appointed to the position because the Headmaster didn’t manage to find someone to take on the position:. He started to go over the list of his followers in his head, searching for one who would work as a teacher.

They turned into the corridor on the seventh floor that lacked talking portraits, but had a wall hanging of a wizard trying to teach ballet to trolls. As he was in the castle anyway, he wanted to use the opportunity to get something of his that he had hidden here some while ago. So he started to pace up and down the stretch of wall opposite the tapestry thinking of the room of hidden things.

.:What are you doing?:. Henry asked sounding confused even while hissing. And as the door suddenly appeared, green eyes widened in surprise.

.:Getting something back that I hid here the last time I was in the castle with a body of my own and an opportunity to walk around without the Headmaster trailing me:. Marvolo
opened the door and turned halfway back to his son. *Come in, but do not stray too far from me. If the room is anything like back when I was here last, there are some dangerous things in here.*

It seemed as if only more things had managed to find their way into the room. But some prominent features seemed to have stayed the same. Feeling for the small charm he had placed on the diadem when he had placed it here, making sure he would know if it was moved, Marvolo started to make his way through the maze of discarded objects, from books to brooms, cauldrons and broken furniture, to bones of long-dead pets, and dubious-looking potions.

Henry stayed close as Marvolo had instructed and looked around as wide-eyed as a child. It was a rather interesting sight, with piles of discarded stuff along small paths meandering from the small door, steadily deeper into the room with its high ceiling.

*.I never knew of this room! How did you manage to make the door appear?*: Henry hissed inquisitively, checking a stack of books for something of interest.

*.You walk along the wall and think about a place to hide something. I never bothered to examine the way the room works more closely. And I guess I will not have the time to do so anytime soon*: Marvolo was actually a little sad about the fact he had so much to do. Delving into complicated and obscure magic had always been something he had enjoyed, until he had done so much damage to himself that he had lost interest in almost everything. Maybe he should try to find something to determine how much damage there still remained.

*.Do you think the room can sort the things in it? Like if I would think of tables when walking outside along the wall it would only have stacks of tables in it?*: Henry speculated as they reached a seemingly random cabinet and Marvolo got a silken pouch out of his pocket.

*.Why don’t you experiment a little with the room?*: Marvolo hissed a little distractedly, levitating his horcrux from his hiding spot into the pouch that would protect this piece of his soul from being spotted by the wards monitoring the school for dark magic. He could not remember the thing being here when he had been possessing Quirrell, but guessed that the Headmaster either had lifted it for that year – he had been setting the school as a trap with the stone and Henry as bait, after all – or had added them later. When Dippet had been Headmaster, there had been no such wards around the school.

Henry watched the diadem float into the pouch but did not comment. *.I guess I could do that. Maybe there is something interesting to find here*: His gaze swept left and right on their way out, still curious but following the orders he had been given.

Marvolo smiled at his son. The boy seemed to be in better spirits than directly after the attempt on his life. Maybe having a room of his own had helped enough for Henry to have a better time at Hogwarts. In a way he had hoped his son would have chosen to be re-sorted, ending up in Slytherin House. But if there was no longer a need – it was a risk to ask for a re-sort to just end up in the same house again – it was all for the better.

They rounded another corner composed of a chair, a small stack of books, a tried-up plant in a pot, and several empty bottles, changing directions again to head for the door that would allow them to leave the room. They started to wander the corridors a bit more, speaking in parseltongue about several other topics, like Henry’s Runes classes.

Just as they stepped into a corridor near the Defence classroom, they both started to search the corridor for the source of the sobs and hiccups they could hear.
Harry was amazed to see the former Tom Marvolo Riddle – who had killed his own grandparents – searching with a concerned expression for a crying child. Himself checking the alcoves and window seats along one wall, Harry contemplated what he had just witnessed. He was pretty sure that he just had seen another horcrux. Another part of his guardian’s soul. Did the man really trust him that much, that he allowed him to see the retrieval of the item? Or was it just that he had needed a reason to wander around the school so he would not raise suspicion?

Either way, the room was fascinating. What treasures might be hidden in there?

He stepped into the last alcove and found a first-year girl in Slytherin robes cradling her hand to her chest and crying. Debating what to do – Slytherins didn't normally react well to his presence – Harry took a step back and looked for Marvolo. Spotting the man at the other end of the corridor, Harry waved and hissed. .:Found her! Over here!: wonder if it was possible to yell in parseltongue.

Deciding to not let the girl cry alone any longer, Harry stepped back into the alcove the moment he noticed Marvolo turning to walk over to where the two of them were.

“Hey, you,” Harry spoke softly, hoping that he would not startle the brunette girl too much, speaking up so suddenly. “Are you hurt? Do you need help?”

With a little gasp a tear-stained face turned to look up at Harry who stood a few steps from the girl, trying to smile reassuringly. It didn’t seem to have the desired effect as the girl shrank in on herself, paling even more. Before either of them could say a word more, Marvolo reached them, getting his wand out of its hiding place somewhere on the man’s person.

“Can you tell me what's wrong?” Marvolo took control of the situation, while Harry stepped to the side, giving the man room to work, keeping a close eye on the only adult wizard around.

The little girl shook her head pressing her hand even closer into her robes, flinching as it made contact with the slightly rough fabric from the second-hand robe of an inexpensive make.

“You are obviously hurt. We have seen you in a vulnerable state already. To not accept our help to get better would not be the best way to go about this,” Marvolo lectured, holding out his hand for her to place her own in it.

Harry didn’t believe his eyes as he saw cuts in the form of words on the back of the girl’s hand, bleeding in tiny rivulets that flowed down the hand to drip on the floor. How could such injuries happen? He squinted a little but could not make out what words were written on the girl’s hand. That he saw them upside down didn’t help any.

“We should go to the infirmary. These cuts need to be tended to properly to make sure they won’t scar. I’m not so good at healing spells,” Marvolo remarked with little inflection, trying to convince the girl that it would be best to move.

But the girl clearly didn't want to go to the infirmary, shaking her head, eyes wide in fear. Harry was sure that the first-year knew the way. If she had wanted to go there, she probably would have done so already.
“Do you know who I am?” Marvolo asked of the girl and Harry wondered what he thought he would accomplish with this question.

The girl nodded, her light brown hair swinging with the motion. “You are Lord Slytherin, sir,” she almost whispered in a small voice.

“That is right. And you know who this is?” the dark-haired wizard followed up, gesturing to Harry who looked on, curious and amazed that Marvolo could be so patient with a little, sniffling girl.

“He is Heir Slytherin,” was the timid reply from the considerably calmer girl.

“Right again. And you are a member of House Slytherin here at Hogwarts. So you are almost family to us. As Lord Slytherin and as an adult, I’m obligated to see to it that you are looked after if you are hurt. You are hurt. Let me take you to the infirmary while Henry here goes to fetch your Head of House. Do you know where Professor Snape might be found now?”

Harry totally understood the dazed look the girl was sporting. That had been a rather lengthy little speech.

He gave the girl credit for being able to answer the question there at the end. “He should be in the common room at the moment, sir. He always is on Sunday evenings.”

Marvolo threw Harry a look clearly giving him the order to go fetch Snape. Nodding that he would do so, Harry just had to ask.: Where did she get these cuts from? What makes such injuries?:

They were such precise cuts. How had that happened?

Helping the girl to stand, Marvolo turned to Harry and simply hissed a short: I’ll explain later: in reply.

So Harry turned fully and took the fastest route down to the dungeons. There was no reason to delay, the little girl needed someone to look after her and be there for her. Since this summer, Harry had started to get a feeling for these things. Before now he had always shared the attention. Madame Pomfrey had so many patients to care for, and Mrs. Weasley had so many children of her own. But he was the only teenager Marvolo had to look after. It felt surprisingly good.

Taking the advice of his mind-healer, Harry repeated that he had a right to be cared for and feel good when someone did, to counter the guilt that wanted to manifest in his chest over the fact that the one caring for him was his parents’ murderer. It wasn’t always helping with the guilt but he was getting better at it.

With this he picked up his pace and started to jog along the corridors.

ooOoo

Severus sat in the common room and answered questions for several of his snakes that they had not managed to find an answer to over the weekend. He would not give them the answers, making it too easy on them, but he would not let them go into the next week with big questions unanswered either.

He had just sent a third-year to look at a particular book for his Charms essay, when the door to the common room opened and a dark-haired boy in Gryffindor robes stepped into the room, looking
around, obviously searching for someone.

Just as the boy spotted him, Severus’ senses caught up with him. Who else could it be but his Lord’s son, the infernal boy with his rule-defying life? And it seemed that the boy had indeed come here to find him, as he made as straight a line to him as was possible in the crowded common room, filled with students working on their homework.

The room fell silent as one after the other realized the Gryffindor had come to their common room for a second time.

“Sorry, sir, but you are needed in the infirmary. While walking through the castle my… father and I came across a Slytherin first-year. She was hurt and… Father convinced her that she should seek help from Madame Pomfrey. He sent me to inform you, sir,” Slytherin reported in a voice carrying through the whole common room. Severus was reasonably sure that no one but him noticed the small hesitation each time before the boy referred to the Dark Lord as his father. Clearly he was playing up the whole thing for the benefit of the Slytherins listening in on every word.

Putting the conundrum of a plotting Potter – former Potter – out of his mind, Severus stood from his chair by a small side table, to follow the boy up to the infirmary, so he could look after one of his students.

Once they were out of the common room Severus turned to the smaller wizard walking by his side to ask the questions on his mind. “Which of my students is hurt, Mr. Slytherin?”

“We didn't ask for her name. But she is a first-year, and we found her in the corridor up by the Defence classroom in one of the alcoves, sir,” was the respectful but not really helpful answer.

Or maybe it was helpful. He knew that Miss Smith had had a detention with the current fool of a Defence Professor. Had Dolores Umbridge done something to harm one of his students? And that for no other reason than the fact that the girl had dared to ask if there were no dangerous animals that one could only keep away with spells. It was not easy to tell the younger years not to question the pink witch without crushing their inquisitiveness and thirst for knowledge.

ooOoo

Marvolo watched from the side as Madame Pomfrey tended to the small girl with the cuts from long and repeated use of a blood quill on the back of her hand. He had insisted that Madame Pomfrey follow the rules for taking evidence of a possible crime, and she had grudgingly complied.

While staying to reassure the girl, Marvolo had learned quite a bit about the young witch. She had had detention with the new Defence Professor this afternoon and had to write lines with an odd quill the Professor gave her. Her name was Tabitha Smith. Her mother was a muggle, and she didn’t know anything about her father. It seemed her mother had met the man at a pub and spent one night with him. She had struggled to provide for her daughter after her parents had stopped supporting her – quite stupid in Marvolo’s opinion, to spurn a daughter because she had a child and wasn't married – but had always been supportive of her little girl. As in most of these cases, the Hogwarts letter and the professor bringing it along had been a big surprise. And a relief. To learn the reason for all the strange things that had happened over the years was better than always second-guessing your own senses.
Marvolo mused if the one-night-stand of the mother had been a wizard, and contemplated whether to offer to pay for an ancestry test. Even if the father chose not to get involved with his daughter – if he even was a wizard – it was better for the girl to know. At least Marvolo hoped it was better. He did know that it might reveal some information that she would wish to have never learned – learning that his father had been a muggle had been a blow to his ego – but in the end, knowing almost always was better than not knowing.

The Matron had fussed over the girl, cleaning the cuts, applying a salve, and wrapping the injured hand in white bandages, by the time Severus made it to the infirmary.

They nodded to each other, blue eyes meeting incredibly dark ones. Severus projected the bow he couldn’t make in front of the medi-witch into Marvolo’s mind, causing the Dark Lord to hide a smirk. Then Severus walked over to the young Miss Smith, while Henry made his way over to where Marvolo stood, throwing concerned glances over to the young Slytherin student.

:.Will she be all right?:. his son wanted to know, and Marvolo answered with a nod.

:.She will be all right. And we will take care of Umbridge and her detention methods. I think you should return to your dormitory. In the next few days I plan to complete a set of mirrors like the one your godfather gave you. I will see to it that you receive it, so we can communicate more easily. Or is there something else you want to tell me, or speak with me about?:.

Henry shook his head, messing up his hair more than it already was. “No, sir. There is nothing we have to talk about today. Thanks for visiting me, and have a good evening.” He gave a polite little nod and then made his way out of the infirmary.

That left Marvolo to wait for Severus and the little Slytherin girl.

Only a few minutes later, the three of them were walking from the infirmary down to the entrance hall, where they would part ways.

“If you need someone on the Wizengamot to support an investigation, or an appeal for one, let me know. I will not tolerate a Professor harming one of the students of Hogwarts,” Marvolo casually said to Severus in a way that would seem he had forgotten about the student walking between them. But of course he was very aware of little ears listening in, paying attention to each word, the way he said them, and how he held himself. It was always a good tactic to let information you wanted to be known trickle through different sources to the people who should get them. No Slytherin worth their salt would just trust information freely given.

“I will keep that in mind, Lord Slytherin. But first I will have to get Miss Smith to agree to talk about what happened today. And check with the other Heads of House to see if any other students have been equally harmed,” Severus answered in measured tones, carefully guiding his student by her shoulder. It seemed the girl was in need of some support.

Once they had reached the entrance hall, Severus gave a respectful nod, the girl bobbed a wobbly curtsey, and Marvolo nodded politely in return. He did not wait for the two others to walk down the staircase to the dungeons before he turned, wrapping his cloak around himself to stave off the chill, and stepped out of the castle, to walk the path down in the direction of Hogsmeade so he could apparate to his Headquarters once he had crossed the anti-apparation wards.

oooOOooo
Up in Gryffindor tower, three friends were waiting for Harry to come back, while the twins demonstrated the effects of their Puking Pastilles, aiming for a large bucket and emptying it with a spell after each use of the colourful sweets.

Hermione rolled her eyes at their antics, but as the twins and Lee Jordan were the ones taking the pills, she had no leverage to do anything about it. But if they started to feed those things to first-years again, she would report them to their mother. It just wasn’t right to use the younger students in that way.

Watching the sickening display of sweets designed to make skiving off classes easier didn't help one bit with Hermione’s goal. She still kept thinking about Harry and why he had been called to the Headmaster’s office. Was her friend in trouble? Had the Aurors found who had played all the cruel pranks on him? Or the people that had tried to kill him? She hoped they would find them soon, so that Harry could relax again. She had seen that he was tense most of the time. Especially when he had his back not to a wall or was moving around. So... most of the time.

“Hermione, you should try to calm down,” Neville said from her side, making notes for the Potions essay due this week. “If you have trouble keeping from cursing the twins, help me with my homework. What do you think about the structure? Am I missing important facts?”

And with that the fifth-year prefect was effectively distracted. While she took the parchment with Neville’s notes to check over she turned to Ron. “You better not be contemplating buying some of those. You are a prefect!”

Ron huffed and glared at the bushy-haired witch. “I don't have enough money to buy some. But I wish I could buy some of the Fever Fudge boxes. I really want to skip a few of the Defence classes. I struggle to not fall asleep.” He made a grimace. “Unlike Binns the pink bitch will notice if I do.”

If looks could kill, Ron would be a dead man, but Hermione let it slide, turning to Neville’s notes and starting to discuss the planned outline for the essay and why she would change some of it.

ooOoo

When Harry stepped into the common room, he was deep in thought. What he had seen today had given him much to think about. Another horcrux had been retrieved. Marvolo had accepted his idea of mirrors to communicate with him. It seemed like Umbridge was torturing students during detentions.

He sidestepped Colin and his camera as the now fourth-year took pictures of the twins showcasing their newest products, walking over to where Ron, Hermione, and Neville were sitting.

They all looked up when Harry let himself fall into one faded, old, and comfortable armchairs.

“What did the Headmaster want, Harry?” Of course it would be Hermione to ask first.

“My guardian wanted to speak with me. And apparently the Headmaster insisted on him meeting up with me in the Headmaster’s office.”

“He came to speak with you about the escapees?” Neville wanted to know. He had spoken to
Hermione quite often since that Tuesday, building their friendship and the truce between their Houses.

“Yes. Basically he told me the same as did your uncle. And then we wandered around the castle a little.” Briefly contemplating if he should tell them about the girl they had found, he decided that they needed to know so they could check if some of the Gryffindors had endured the same kind of torture at the hand of their Defence Professor. Not even Lockhart had been that bad a teacher.

“Do you know if any of the Gryffindors had detention with Umbridge?”

“Professor Umbridge, Harry! And why do you ask?” Hermione chided immediately.

And looking around, checking that most of their peers were distracted by Lee and the twins, Harry started his tale. “While walking around the castle, we found a crying first-year…”

ooOoo

After he had handed over Miss Smith to one of the female prefects – after he had gotten her consent to testify against Dolores Umbridge, if needed – Severus made his way over to Minerva’s office.

He was called in after his customary short knock and stalked into the room, robes billowing behind him, scowl firmly in place. That no one seemed to have noticed what was going on incensed him greatly.

“Minerva, I think it is best if we get Filius and Pomona in here too. There was a matter brought to my attention this afternoon that needs to be addressed as soon as possible and as quietly as we can manage.”

With her eyes wide and a frown on her face – the one she always got when there was a probably bad situation to resolve – Minerva stood from behind her desk, where she had been marking some homework scrolls, and walked over to her floo to call the two other Heads of House.

Severus in the meantime levitated four chairs over to the fireplace and arranged them so they could easily talk to each other. He hoped to keep the Headmaster out of this as long as possible. He just knew it would get much more complicated once the old man was involved.

ooOoo

“I really need to find time to renovate this old hovel!” Sirius groused and Remus chuckled, bent over the latest history assignment Harry had sent him to be graded.

“I can’t say I disagree, Padfoot.” Remus agreed easily, dipping his quill into the red ink to mark a spelling mistake. At least Harry’s writing was much more readable than in the past. It seemed that Lord Slytherin had made sure Harry improved his penmanship.

“But renovation isn’t really the reason you have made your way up to my room, is it?” Remus asked idly. He didn’t really have the patience to let Sirius make ever smaller circles around the
The animagus carded his hands into his hair, huffing and sitting down on Remus’ bed. “You know me too well, Moony. I need your advice. You always were the wisest one of all of us. And I fear I didn't have the time to really grow up.”

Closing his inkwell and placing the quill in its stand – this would probably take some time – Remus turned in his chair so he could place his arms on the back of it, watching his friend. “I’m always up for giving advice.”

“Now that evil Bella has managed to get out of prison, I have started to think about a few… things.” The dark-haired, silver-eyed man traced the lines on the comforter with one finger. “I’m Lord Black now. Head of the Family. I get to make the important decisions.” Sirius let himself fall back onto the bed, now lying there, staring up at the ceiling.

“What should I do about Bellatrix and Andromeda? One is a Death Eater and the other a loving mother.”

Remus thought he knew what this was about. “You want me to tell you if you should disown Bellatrix and invite Andromeda back into the family?”

Sirius sat back up, nodding his head. “I don’t even know how to approach Andromeda. Booting Bella out is easy, but I never said anything in public when Andromeda was thrown out. What if she rejects my invitation?”

Sighing, Remus stood and sat down beside his friend. They would clearly need to discuss this in depth to make Sirius comfortable with the idea that Andromeda Tonks might not want to be accepted back into the Black family. So he started talking Sirius through all the possible scenarios and what he could do to reduce awkwardness.

It was late in the night before they retreated back into their respective rooms to sleep.

In the house used as Headquarters by the Death Eaters, Marvolo made his way up from the cell Karkaroff was held in to the meeting room. They had held a short meeting there every evening since his followers had managed to escape from Azkaban. And now he was on his way to the next one.

Glad that he had taken the time he had left for some stress relief – casting a few choice curses on the traitor had helped tremendously – Marvolo walked by his office, where now two horcruxes were contained. He had almost managed to get them all back under his control. The part from the diary and the ring were back in his body, with the main part of his soul – now that those two parts were back the biggest part was again stored there – the locket and the diadem resting in his warded cabinet in the office. Henry was keeping a sliver of his soul safe. He only needed to get back the cup that was stored away and he would have complete control over his own soul once again.

He sighed and spelled the blood from his robes. If one waited too long before doing that, the probability of stains staying in the fabric rose significantly.

In the meeting room some of his Aurors, Lucius, and Goyle were already waiting, talking quietly,
drinking tea and stronger beverages.

The moment Marvolo set foot into the room, they all rose from their seats only to kneel down, bowing their heads.

“Get up and sit. We don't have all night,” Marvolo snapped out. Maybe the stress relief hadn't had the effect he had been aiming for. But killing the traitor would be too lenient. He hadn't nearly suffered enough to die already.

He pinched his nose, closing his eyes, and started on a calming breathing pattern. He heard glass touching glass, a liquid being poured and someone walking over to him, while all the others seemed to hold their breath.

“Firewhiskey, my Lord.” It was Lucius standing beside him, offering a tumbler of firewhiskey. Sometimes the man was positively Slytherin. Or maybe just a father. Having a son at Hogwarts brought worries Marvolo never had known even existed.

Opening his eyes, Marvolo let his hand drop to his side and took the offered tumbler with the other. A curt nod had the blond Lord backing away to sit down. He sipped the drink, and sat down on his own chair. The one that was just that much impressive than the others.

“I want all of you to collect as much information as you can get on Dolores Jane Umbridge. Be discreet, but bring everything. If she broke so much as a plate during her days at Hogwarts, I want to know. Big or small, everything can be of use.” He almost growled the name of that horrible witch. He would need another round of stress relief when the meeting was over.

“May I inquire why? She has been opposed to the changes in the werewolf bills from the start. What changed?”

Lucius was either really brave or stupid today. A humourless smirk made its appearance on Marvolo’s face. “Today I learned that this excuse of a teacher is torturing students in detention. She makes them write lines.” A few bewildered wizards exchanged glances.” With a blood quill.” Marvolo knocked back the rest of his drink and then sat the tumbler down with a thump on the little table next to him.

“Dawlish, Savage, anything new?” Better get the meeting over with. Maybe he could keep one of them here and practice duelling?

They were in the middle of the report of the two Aurors as Xerxes came in.

As not all of them could be absent all the time at the same time – even the most inattentive person would put the pieces together if the same people tended to be absent all at the same time – Marvolo had specifically instructed everyone to come to the meetings only when they could get away from everyone else without causing suspicion.

So Marvolo wondered why the man looked so pale and went to kneel, robes elegantly pooling on the tiles floor, the moment he had taken two steps into the room. The man remained where he was, head bowed, obviously waiting for the permission to rise and approach.

“Quit the theatrics, Xerxes. I’m angry. But not at you. So get up and tell us what news you have.” He sounded tired now, but he didn’t really care. It had been a long week. A really long week. Maybe working on the mirrors would help him relax?

Xerxes stood, getting a piece of paper out of his robe pocket and holding it out for his Lord to take. “It seems that my sons have called for their elf. And Floppy brought back this letter.” The grey
haired man swallowed nervously. “They are laying low in a small muggle house and ask for information.”

Marvolo smiled. Some good news at last. “Then we will provide them with information.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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It was late in the night from Sunday to Monday, and Marvolo was organizing a small party of Death Eaters to have a look at the escapees. He was wearing robes much like the ones he had favoured before he had spent over a decade as a bodiless spirit. If the need should arise for him to make a personal appearance before the group, he thought it prudent to sport as many clues and familiar features as possible.

Lucius was already there, standing to the side in typical Death Eater robes, mask in hand, waiting. As one of his higher-ranking followers, the blond would be able to command some respect and hopefully gain some insight into the state of the escapees’ minds. Healer Greengrass was sorting through his supplies on a table nearby, double-checking that he had everything he might need. While the Carrow twins stood to the side, talking between themselves.

Xerxes would join them later to hand over a letter to Rabastan and Rodolphus. But he would not accompany the expedition. As his heiress had established a truce with House Longbottom, based on the promise that House Lestrange would not give shelter to the brothers – as informal as an agreement only spoken was – Xerxes didn’t wish to risk getting into contact with his sons before he knew more about their state of mind.

Sipping on his third cup of coffee, Marvolo turned as steps heralded the arrival of another of his Death Eaters. His eyes fell on a tired looking Severus Snape, carrying his mask in one hand, woollen robes billowing around him.

They exchanged a greeting of polite nods, and Severus walked over to their healer. “Healer Greengrass, are you in need of any potions I may brew?”

“I would guess that I will be in need of some really strong nutrient potions. Possibly Dreamless Sleep, and a few calming draughts. Maybe some all-purpose healing potions. I will know more once I have seen them,” was the distracted reply of the healer, who was rummaging in his satchel marked with the staff and wand of the Healer profession.

Severus nodded and made some notes on a small notepad he got out of a robe pocket. The dark-haired man turned around when Lucius stepped up to him. “Can you add an anti-nausea potion to your list of potions to brew? I will provide the ingredients or pay for them and your work, of course.”

A narrow brow rose and a small smirk appeared on Severus’ face. “Anti-nausea potion, Lucius? Eager, are we?”

Marvolo watched them banter, pausing in his pacing, glad for the distraction.

“When both my betters demand the same of me, who am I to resist?” The happy little smirk on Lucius’ face was not something Marvolo got to see often. He needed a moment to work out who the man was talking about. But then it hit him. Lucius was talking about Narcissa and himself. The woman he had married for life, and the Lord he had pledged his life to. A little ironic. But he felt good being placed alongside Narcissa Malfoy. He was sure Lucius wouldn’t have dared make such a statement where Marvolo could have heard before he had regained his sanity.
The smirk on Lucius’ face got predatory as he watched the Potions Master sketch a brewing plan. “And how are you progressing at the task we were all set, Severus? I have not heard anything about you searching for a partner to start a family.”

The dark look Severus was throwing at Lucius for that could have peeled paint from the wall. Marvolo felt as if he were watching a theatre performance. In an odd way it was quite a bit of fun. Even more fun than it had been to see Karkaroff writhe on the floor, screaming.

And wasn’t that unexpected.

“Well, as I have taught almost every witch younger than me by four years, and most of the others are either married, not interested, or firmly in Dumbledore’s pocket, my supply to choose from is rather limited.” The dark eyes narrowed dangerously. “And I would rather not marry only for the sake of following orders, Lucius.”

That caused a blush to creep over Lucius’ face, and Marvolo wondered what about the marriage between Narcissa and Lucius would warrant such a reaction. He thought he remembered that the marriage had been an arranged one. But he honestly hadn’t really cared anymore at that point in time. Now he wished he had paid more attention to the lives of his followers back then. This curiosity was new and refreshing, but was starting to get irritating.

“If you need help meeting more possible candidates, I’m sure Narcissa would be thrilled…”

Cutting off the other wizard mid-sentence, Severus quickly turned to his friend. “There is no need. I found someone I can see myself marrying and being reasonably happy with. That we don’t flaunt our… relationship for everyone to see is no reason for you and your wife to meddle in my privacy.”

Severus turned to Marvolo, bowing his head. “With your permission, my Lord, I would like to use the laboratory here to brew the potions Healer Greengrass will need.” There was no hint left of the slight nervousness that had lurked in those dark eyes while the man had spoken about a woman and a relationship.

Content to know that Severus was working on the fulfilment of his order to enlarge the magical population, Marvolo nodded. “You may use the laboratory here. If you need anything, send for the elf, and add any ingredients running low to the list hanging by the door.”

Marvolo used the list to keep track of the ingredients he was using, so he could send out one of the elves, or the Carrows, to refill his stores. It was only logical for Severus to use it as well when he was using the lab at Headquarters to brew potions for the use of the Death Eaters.

Severus left the room after he had bowed again, robes billowing behind him.

A few minutes later Xerxes came in, a roll of parchment in his hand. Behind the mask they all wore whenever they ventured into a public place, Marvolo could clearly see worry for his sons. He briefly wondered that he could relate to that, not used to empathy at all – worry over Henry and what might happen at Hogwarts had become a constant companion – before he gave his oldest friend a small smile. “We will play a game of chess while the others are away. What colour do you want to play?”

“Playing against you, Marvolo, I will need every advantage I can get. I will play white.”

While they sat down by the small table with its board and chess pieces, the team assembled and left to contact the escapees at their hiding place.
Waking with a start up in his room at the top of the tower, Harry sat up in his bed, rubbing his eyes, breathing much too fast. That hadn’t been a pleasant dream. Since the end of summer he had not dreamed of the happenings from the graveyard, instead dreaming of the times Dudley had hunted him through the streets of the neighbourhood of Privet Drive. Sometimes he dreamed of his aunt shouting at him, or the bellowing voice of Vernon berating him for some misdeed Harry was sure he didn’t do.

But tonight he had dreamed about enormous pink quills etching words into the back of the hands of faceless young children while a sugary-sweet smiling Umbridge was watching from a pink wingback chair sitting on a dais.

Taking calming breaths, falling back into a pattern of breathing he had learned over the summer from Professor Snape, Harry regained some composure. He had sweated a lot during his bad dream – he felt it did not really count as a nightmare, comparing it to the things he had dreamed about in the past – and was now contemplating if he would be able to find sleep again if he crawled back under his covers.

He was pretty sure he would not be able to go back to sleep, so he rolled over to the bedside table to get his glasses. Sliding the still-new glasses – so much nicer than his old ones – onto his nose, the room came back into focus for Harry. Briefly he wondered if he should ask for the potion that would restore his eyesight, so he would be able to get rid of the glasses. But he still was unsure. It was a dark potion after all, even if only classified as such because it used blood.

Frustrated, Harry abandoned this train of thought, as he wouldn’t get anywhere with it. Since he had been told that there was a way to heal his eyes, he had thought about it more than once. The thought of not needing glasses any more was a nice one, but the need to make use of a potion that was considered dark wasn’t as nice. Even if the Ministry’s definition of dark didn’t seem right anymore, now that he knew more about the whole matter. He had asked Hermione, and then had sat through an hour-long lecture about the lack of proper definition of what was dark. And when Hermione hadn’t been able to find it, there probably wasn’t one.

Scooting back to sit against the headboard, Harry stared unseeing into his room. Reading didn’t sound like something he would like to do at the moment, so Harry sat around awhile, doing nothing but staring at the far wall.

His roaming gaze fell onto the two-way mirror from Sirius, lying on his desk beside the charms essay about the reasons why one should never combine a cheering charm with a tickling charm. After the long discussion in the common room the previous evening, Harry had not called his godfather.

Since the escape the both of them had communicated – at least briefly – every day. Maybe he should call his godfather now. Even if calling on him in the middle of the night might frighten him for a moment.

Without contemplating the possible consequences, Harry climbed out of his bed, walked the few steps over to his desk, his bare feet making no sound on the thick plush carpet, and grabbed the mirror.

“Sirius,” Harry said to the reflective surface, walking back to his bed, to crawl under the cover. It was cold in the room only in his pyjamas.

Felling a little guilty for causing such anxiety, Harry hastened to reassure his godfather. “I’m fine! I’m in my room at Hogwarts! Nothing happened... well, I had a bad dream, but I’m not hurt or anything. I just couldn’t sleep and thought I wanted to talk to you.”

The fear vanished from his grey eyes and the older wizard huffed out a breath of relief. “Don’t you scare me again, pup. Calling me in the middle of the night. What was I to think?” Harry grimaced. “But on the other hand I told you you could call me any time, didn’t I? So what was it you wanted to talk about?” Sirius conceded and waited patiently for Harry to begin his story.

“Today I had a visit from Lord Slytherin.” Sirius made a face as if someone was holding some flobberworms under his nose, and Harry was happy that he’d decided to call Marvolo by his title when talking with his godfather. “And we found a first-year near the defence classroom. She was crying, because she had cuts on the back of her hand. Later I learned that she had come from a detention with that harridan Umbridge!” Harry felt his anger rise again. It had taken quite some time before he had been calm enough to go to sleep. “I told Hermione, and she together with Ron, then started to ask around. One of our firsties had detention with her too. He told us that he had to use an odd quill to write lines. And Dean had to write lines in his detention as well. I guess she does that a lot! Most students in Gryffindor do almost anything to avoid detention with her. But I have the feeling she’s trying to bait us!” Harry had a really dark look on his face once he had finished his rant. Umbridge was the worst professor for defence they had had until now. And that was counting Quirrell... even while possessed! The man might not have taught much, but he hadn’t actively hurt any students, either.

What a peculiar thought.

Sirius had a frown on his face, obviously pondering what Harry had told him. In the background Harry could make out the edges of a pillow. “She makes children write lines with a blood quill? Have you told the teachers?” Now Sirius was almost growling, obviously agitated over the story.

“Professor Snape knows. And Professor McGonagall came into the common room to speak with the first-year and Dean a little before curfew. I think they didn’t know before today, but are acting now. I wish we had someone else as professor this year.” Harry sighed. It would be nice to have a good professor for defence. Remus had been great, but having Professor Snape once in awhile because of the full moon, and all it entailed, had not been fun.

“And why was Lord Slytherin at Hogwarts to talk with you?” There was a little venom in Sirius’ voice, which let Harry know that he really tried to be civil when around Marvolo. Most of the time Sirius didn’t like the fact that Harry was the heir and adopted son of the wizard who had been Voldemort.

“He wanted to talk with me about some safety measures that he wants to take until the escapees are captured,” the green-eyed teenager said dismissively. He was not going to explain too much to Sirius.

The wizard at the other mirror made a noncommittal sound. “Well, he certainly is no fool. And he would protect his heir, wouldn’t he?” Sirius sounded bitter and his face once more got contemplative. “I’ve been thinking on and off about something, Harry. Since I became Lord Black, I keep getting letters from many single witches, more or less subtly asking for me to marry them. All of them have the same argument.” Sirius huffed while Harry listened carefully. He could guess what the argument was. Marvolo had been complaining about mothers trying to hook one of their daughters up with him. He always used the fact he already had an heir in Harry to deflect their
attentions. Funny what they wrote about in their regular letters by now.

The families interested in Marvolo were all more leaning to the conservative political spectrum, not in the least turned away by the fact that he had been a Dark Lord in the past. A few of them were even aware that he still was a Dark Lord, using the face he presented to the public to approach him.

That Sirius would be subjected to a similar treatment as a new Lord who still was quite young was only to be expected.

“They say that I will need an heir. And that if I marry one of them, I would get a healthy son really fast. But…” a pleading look entered grey eyes, “I really don’t want to marry right now. And I always felt like you were my son. But I don’t want to just make assumptions. There have been too many decisions made concerning you without your input. And I don’t want to make that error again. You never should have been left with Petunia. If I hadn’t gone after that rat…” Sirius was rambling and finally had caught up to that fact. He blushed and gathered his wits. “So what I’m trying to ask is, would you agree to becoming my heir? Heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Black?”

Harry knew what an honour it was to be asked to become heir to one of the old families. After this summer, he really understood what this all entailed. And that was the reason he didn’t answer on the spot. He loved his godfather, and would have loved to live with him. He really had been happy in third year when Sirius invited him to live with the animagus, away from the Dursleys.

But now he knew what responsibilities came with the position of heir to any of the families with a seat on the Wizengamot. If he added another family to the two he already was heir to, he would have to learn another set of family traditions, and it would add more complexity to his social interactions. So as happy as he would be as Sirius’ heir, spending more time with him, he didn’t think he could manage.

“Sirius,” the other's face fell at the reluctance in Harry’s voice, “I really am happy that you want me to be so close to you. But as I’m already heir to two families, I doubt that I can handle the added responsibilities.” By the end of his answer, Harry looked as sad as Sirius.

Then a thought struck Harry. Sirius was not really old. So why wouldn’t he want children of his own? Without waiting, Harry voiced his thought. “Don’t you want children of your own? I mean, if you make me your heir and have children later, won't that cause problems?”

A hand waved through the small portion Harry could see of his godfather through the mirror. “Don’t be absurd. Can you see me settling down?” Sirius scoffed, deflecting the thought of marrying any time soon. “No, I don’t plan to marry, now, after I’m finally free again. Why would I do such a thing? I plan to visit every club I can find in London by next summer!”

The laugh that followed did sound forced to Harry’s ears and he was about to call Sirius out for pretending, worried what his godfather might be hiding, when another thought struck him. “And what if there are some Black descendants out there, believed to be muggle-borns? Just like Hermione is the granddaughter of a Squib from the Lestrange family? Maybe you can find someone that way?” Harry’s excitement showed through quite clearly.

And Sirius' eyes got bright as well. “Oh, that would be a blast! Some kid raised by Muggles as the Heir to the House of Black. I like that, Harry! That’s actually a really good idea. I can understand if you feel it would be too much for you. After all, I tried to run from this at your age too.” Sirius winked.

Then quite suddenly a thoughtful look crossed Sirius’ face. “But how to go about it? How can I
find them?”

Harry furrowed his brow. The fact that he was actually a descendant from the Slytherin Family on his mother’s side had been only discovered by accident. And only Hermione’s unquenchable thirst for knowledge had led to the discovery of her ancestry. Theo’s younger – adopted – brother had been found on the streets and tested after the fact. “Just randomly testing those believed to be muggle-born would get costly rather fast,” Harry mumbled, getting a nod from a concentrated thinking Sirius in the mirror.

Tapping his fingers on the edge of the mirror Harry slowly spoke his thoughts out loud. “If I remember correctly, Theo told me his father – Lord Nott – is going through the family chronicles, searching for mentions of any Squibs that might have left the magical world in the direction of the muggle part of Britain. Maybe you could do the same?”

Sirius groaned, carding his hand through his chin-length hair, brushing it out of his face. “That sounds like a lot of work.”

Harry had to laugh at the dismayed look on his godfather’s face. “And it would only be the start. Once you've found the Squibs and their names, you'll have to wade through the archives in the Muggle world to find the currently living descendants. Maybe you could get a private eye to do the legwork?”

Slowly Sirius nodded, and then he looked at something behind his mirror, eyes going wide. “Harry, do you know how late it is? You have school tomorrow! Get back to sleep! I will not be held responsible for you not getting enough sleep!”

Harry laughed at the mock serious expression and the try at a scolding tone, but nodded anyway. It was late, and he had lessons tomorrow. Both Defence and Potions. Not a day he would be willing to be at less than his best.

Smiling, he scooted lower in his bed. “Good night, Padfoot. Let me know if you find someone!”

“Good night, Harry. I hope you will have better dreams now.”

They cut the connection and Harry placed the mirror back on his night stand before he dimmed the lights, curling up under his covers. Maybe images of Padfoot sniffing through stacks of books and parchment, searching for a clue, would keep nightmares at bay for the rest of the night.

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Albus looked over the assembly of wizards and witches gathered around the table, huddled over their hot mugs of coffee. They all looked rather tired – not surprising, as it was rather late in the night – and discouraged. Lately, all his plans had failed, or simply crumbled into dust under his hands. He sighed. Better get this meeting started so he could send them home to get some much-needed sleep.

“We will not need to wait for Severus. He informed me earlier that he has been called to brew some potions for Voldemort. So, Tonks, Kingsley, how is the search for the escaped Death Eaters progressing?”

“There has been no progress. Aurors have been searching all known hiding places. Even a few that
we didn’t discover after the war, which Lord Slytherin told Madame Bones about. Not sure if that
was the last of them, or if he only wants to appear as if he is helping.” Kingsley tiredly closed his
eyes a moment before taking a sip from his coffee.

Nymphadora picked up the report. “Searches in all family homes of the escapees came up empty.
And we haven’t found the boat the group of wizards used to reach the island. Some speculate that
the Death Eaters in fact never managed to reach the shore, but were involved in a shipwreck. I
don’t know what to believe.”

That was disconcerting. Albus gave the two Aurors one of his grandfatherly smiles, trying to
reassure them that their efforts were appreciated, before he turned to the one ex-Auror in their
midst. “Alastor, any more success with monitoring the hideouts?”

With the small shake of his old friend's head, Albus’ mind started whirling. Was it possible that the
boat had not made it to the shore, that the Death Eaters were dead? Could it be that Tom really had
nothing to do with the escape? It looked like the wizards found dead at the prison had not been
connected in any way to Death Eaters at all. So to assume that Tom had not planned the escape
wasn’t so far-fetched.

“Nothing. But I didn’t think we would find anything that way. Even half-mad after so long with
Dementors, they're not as dumb as that.”

A moment of silence was broken by Arthur. “It isn’t impossible that they managed to sink their
boat. I once tried to use a boat I got in a Muggle shop. An inflatable one. It's harder than one would
think.” The red-headed wizard nodded knowingly, sure that he, as the one interested in the way
muggles solved problems, was the one that knew the most of it.

With a wave of foul odour came a comment from Mundungus. “In the pubs, it's speculated that
they made for the continent. France, Germany… anywhere not here. It’s as far to the continent as it
is to here from that island, after all.”

Albus nodded knowingly. He hadn’t thought about that possibility. Even if the Death Eaters hadn’t
meant to go there, it was quite possible they had chosen the wrong direction and landed there by
accident.

“Arthur, I want you to peruse the muggle news and papers. See if there was a boat accident
anywhere, a shipwreck found, or an abandoned boat on one of the shores of the continent.” Albus
turned to Alastor while the Weasley patriarch nodded. “Can you see if one of your old contacts on
the continent has heard anything of note?” The man with his many old battle scars nodded,
expression of the kind not expecting to succeed. “Daedalus, Nymphadora, Kingsley, keep an ear
out. I think we should try to keep up monitoring the houses of Family Lestrange and the Malfoys.
They have the best wards, and are the most likely to shelter the escaped Death Eaters.”

Tired nods all around were the only answer. The last week had been draining for them all.
Monitoring that many places for any suspicious happenings and working their normal jobs took its
toll.

Albus didn’t give any special orders to Mundungus, even if the wizard had his uses with his
contacts in the shadier parts of wizarding Britain, he did tend to not follow orders very well. His
parting words and an order to all to keep their eyes and ears open would have to suffice.

After they all were gone, either by apparition or floo, Albus made his way back to the school. He
had memories to review and maps to search. After he had destroyed the ring – and with the diary
already taken care of – he needed to find possibly four more horcruxes. It had not been easy to get
Horace to tell him what he knew, but now he had to act on his knowledge. The curse on the ring, and the backlash it had brought, was no reason to falter in his efforts.

He had a cave to find. It might just hold another of the objects. And with his newly acquired memories – it had not been easy cornering Burke, the man had made quite the vanishing act in the early nineties – he had more clues to work with. If Albus had learned anything in recent years, it was how to track and find things and people trying to keep hidden.

oooOOooo

While putting the assorted cauldrons on the burners and gathering the ingredients needed from the various storage cupboards, Severus decided that the potions laboratory in his Lord’s Headquarters was adequate. It was worlds better than the one the Order currently had at its disposal, but on a par with the one at Grimmauld Place. As this house had been in the possession of the Blacks as well, it was no wonder they were similarly equipped.

The potions he had to brew today were ones he had brewed numerous times. Nothing he really needed to concentrate on. So he had a little time pondering his experiments and the research he did for his Lord.

The two-father-potion was making good progress. It seemed that the woman who had been his first real proband was pregnant – they had tested with a muggle method to not risk any magic affecting this first trial – and the prospective fathers were ecstatic. Before they would try a second time, they would wait until the child was born. Until then a muggle doctor specialised in gynaecology would take care of the woman and monitor the progress. Severus wouldn’t risk the health of another woman and unborn child if it was not really necessary.

To Severus’ immense relief, the Dark Lord had agreed. The Potions Master had not been sure if this approach would meet with his Lord’s approval. Until now there had been no need to tell the Dark Lord he had to wait. In the past the man had never reacted well to something like that. But with his sanity, his patience seemed to have returned too.

With the potion for removal – or rather dimming – of traumatising memories finished, and the development of the two-fathers-potion on a forced hiatus, Severus had started on planning another potion that would be useful to achieve the Dark Lord’s new goals.

Considering all the information about Squibs being born mostly to families of pure blood – long lines of only wizards and witches as ancestors – and never to a pair of half-bloods or so-called muggle-born, Severus was convinced that genetics played into it somehow. When wizards and witches only sought their partners in the limited community of magical beings, avoiding anyone not entirely human, the genetic pool was too limited to provide enough diversity. Throwing out those that were named Squibs forced those individuals to find partners among the non-magical, bringing in new genetic material, resulting in magical children being born several generations later.

Not throwing out the Squibs would also limit the influx of new blood through muggle partners. It was essential that they find a way to determine the best possible pairs so as to avoid the problem leading to Squibs or no children at all.

Severus had studied several potions used to determine the closeness of relatives. Those had been used to prove if a witch claiming that a wizard was the father of her bastard child told the truth.
None of those were as powerful as the one the goblins made – Severus bemoaned the fact that no wizard was allowed to research in that direction, but didn’t dare provoke a new Goblin war – but they were a good starting point for what he had in mind.

His plan was to create a potion that would indicate by colour if a pair would have magically sound children. A tool to prove to the most staunch believers of pureblood ancestry that marrying a muggle-born witch or wizard into their families was beneficial.

Swiftly chopping some daisy roots, Severus thought about the problem of possible test subjects. If he could get Molly and Arthur to help him, he would have an example of two purebloods with several magical children. He knew that Goyle and Crabbe had had trouble having children at all, and the sons they had now weren’t the most bright or magically powerful. Bellatrix and Rodolphus hadn’t been able to have children. They had tried and even used fertility potions.

But beside those, Severus wasn’t sure how to get couples that had children or had tried without success to participate. Maybe he would be able to get the parents of Miss Granger to help him test a prototype.

With a heavy heart, Severus thought about Sonja and himself. Considering the orders of his Lord, it might be prudent to test the two of them as soon as possible, so he could break things up early if they would have trouble with having children.

Maybe he should bring up his wish for children on their next date, or in his next letter. Bringing the topic into conversation.

A few weeks ago Severus had brewed a potion used to determine general fertility – another one he wished to use as a base for his potion project – and had tested himself. To his relief, he was able to father children. He had not really doubted this outcome, but there had been Potions Masters in the past that had lost the ability through their contact with some of the more dangerous potion ingredients. This was one of the reasons he always was a little overly cautious in his work.

While chopping and stirring, somewhere in the back of Severus’ mind the memories of the people the Dark Lord considered special cases regarding these orders to procreate, made themselves known. Maybe there was another way to go about things, if it should prove difficult for them to have magical children. But it was not wise to get ahead of himself. First he had to subtly get Sonja’s opinion on children and his past.

The first batch of healing potions was now finished, and Severus started to decant the first potion into the prepared phials. He would have to ask the Dark Lord for help in acquiring the needed test couples, it would be best if they were easily accessible and did not need a big explanation.

Lucius was still beside himself with worry over his careless remark setting Narcissa on the same level as his Lord, when he was taken to the hiding place by the Lestrange elf. It was a little undignified to let himself be taken to his destination by an elf. But it was easier this way, as he had never even been near the place the escapees were hiding.

From behind his bone white mask the blond wizard let his gaze wander over the area, assessing – wand in hand – if there was any immediate danger to be taken care of.
Luckily for them, the neighbourhood seemed to be devoid of any Muggles, and Lucius quickly turned to examine the house the elf had indicated as the one the people he was here to see were hiding in. He had to concede that it looked good, and if he was searching for another summer cottage, he wouldn’t cross it off the list of possibilities right away.

The others appeared by his side – holding hands with the little elf – while he was checking the surroundings of the house for any wards or spells. He found some Muggle-repelling charms and one rather basic proximity ward designed to alert whoever cast it to anyone approaching.

Nodding to his fellows, Lucius gestured with his hand, waving them to move forward, making a small circular motion to command them to surround the small building.

With the younger Greengrass at his side, Lucius walked confidently over to the door, crossing the weak ward, to make their presence known.

Before they reached the door, it was opened from within and a witch – judging by the clothes – with dark matted hair and a crazy look about her, was sprinting towards him. “I knew our Lord would come get us! Take me to him, now!” the witch demanded, and the way she was speaking made it all too obvious that this was his sister-in-law that was running towards him.

“That out here in the open!” Lucius hissed to her, grabbing her by her arm, dragging her back to the house. She went, momentarily surprised, but regained her senses once they had entered the house, spotting the others, holding their wands, watching the door.

The moment they were through the door, Lucius removed his mask, to make sure the escaped Death Eaters would recognize him as someone with authority and comply with his orders. “I brought a healer. He will check you over, before you all will be moved to another place,” Lucius commanded, waving Greengrass into the room, and shoving Bella into one of the simple leather armchairs that were not occupied at the moment.

“Who can give me a report?” Grey eyes wandered over the small crowd. They looked as if they would keel over any moment, and as if a strong wind would be able to blow them away. At least they didn’t reek as he had expected them to. It seemed that they had managed to take baths and change into some cleaner clothes since their escape.

“I can give you a report,” a man from the farthest corner said, standing. Judging by the pockmarks, how tall the man was, and the greying dark hair, Lucius assumed that this was Rookwood. Not one of the escapees looked anything like their old selves, or even much like the pictures that had been published in the Daily Prophet.

While Greengrass got out his wand and arranged his potions on the low table in the middle of the room, Lucius walked over to one of the walls, out of the way, to listen to the short, succinct report given by the former Unspeakable. Working to keep up his cool mask of attentive disinterest, Lucius wondered how they had even managed to get here alive. All those rumours going around the Ministry about shipwreck and drowning now sounded much more plausible than before.

Suddenly Bella was screeching something Lucius didn’t quite catch – Later he would think back, remembering something along the lines of “You don’t get to tell me what to do! I’m capable of fighting for my Lord!” – before spells started flying around.

Ducking down behind an armchair out of reflexes long honed in duelling training, Lucius took a moment to assess the situation, before he aimed his wand at Bella, trying to stun her. Sadly, she was a good fighter – even after all those years in prison – and dodged the spell fired at her.
The wand she had acquired seemed to be working rather well for her, as she was flinging cutting
curses and other lethal spells around the room. Lucius saw several wizards going down, heard cries
of pain and the splintering of wood, casting stunners into the mass of moving wizards. He was here
to get the escapees to a safe location, not to kill them.

Only a few moments later, silence settled once more over the room, a few of the Death Eaters that
had been guarding the perimeter standing in the door from the hallway, Lucius getting out of his
covered position.

Several of the escapees were lying on the floor, and Greengrass was already hurrying from one to
the other, checking them over for injuries that needed swift treatment.

With a few purposeful strides – carefully avoiding the remains of more than one armchair – Lucius
came to stand beside his sister-in-law. She was panting rather harshly, glaring up at him with dark
anger burning in her eyes. It seemed that she really was in no shape to fight for longer periods of
time.

With a sneer Lucius pointed his wand at her, casting a silent incarcerous at her, causing strong,
slim ropes to wrap around her thin body. She resembled more of a switch than a witch. Shaking his
head at her useless struggles against the binds, Lucius turned to see what the healer had to say
about the hapless fools who had come into the crossfire of this short impromptu temper tantrum.

Raising a questioning eyebrow, the blond wizard waited for the healer's explanation.

“Three are dead. Three more injured by wood pieces that pierced through their clothes. They will
recover in time. The general condition of them all is rather bad. But that was to be expected.”
Greengrass waited patiently, having an eye on his patients sitting around the room, looking even
more dismal than before.

“What set Bella off like that?” Before he was to call the Dark Lord to this place, Lucius needed all
the information he could gather. The man was much more reasonable than Lucius could remember
ever seeing him before that night in ‘81, but he still remembered the night they had punished the
traitor, and what had happened to the man who had attacked the Dark Lord’s heir.

No reason to tempt fate by not learning all there was to learn about the situation. He really didn’t
want to draw the wrath of his Lord on himself.

“I checked her over, then gave her a potion to counteract the infection she has in one of her molars
on the upper left side. When I started to explain the regimen of exercises and potions, as well as the
diet she will need to follow to get better, she accused me of trying to show her up. Something about
me trying to hold her back, to disgrace her in the eyes of our Lord.” Greengrass gave a thoughtful
gaze over the sickly escapees – probably checking on them – before he turned back to the higher
ranking Death Eater. “I think her mental stability is more questionable than that of the others.”

Lucius nodded absentmindedly, mustering the still weakly struggling Bellatrix. “She was not the
most stable even before she spent that much time in a cell surrounded by Dementors.” Grey eyes
once more sharpened as Lucius came to a decision. There was no way to keep this from his Lord,
so he would do better to call the man now, so he could get an impression of the situation first-hand.

Shaking the left sleeve of his wide dark robe back to his elbow, Lucius nodded to the Healer. “I
will call our Lord, and give a report. Go over and tend to the wounded. I will keep watch over
Bella.”

Nodding his head, already more focused on the patients, Greengrass acknowledged the order and
went to do as he was told.

Opening the cuff of the shirt of Egyptian cotton Lucius wore under his robes, the wizard in charge of this mess got access to his wrist and therefore the changed Dark Mark that became visible now that he needed it.

Taking a deep breath to brace himself, Lucius pressed a finger from his right hand firmly against the Dark Mark, concentrating on his desire to inform his Lord and call him to the place he was. The Mark instantly went jet black and a faint burning sensation swept through it, before it faded back into the lighter grey it was when inactive but visible. Moments later Lucius buttoned his cuff back up over the once again invisible Mark.

“The Dark Lord will be here in a short time. Try to compose yourself,” Lucius informed the room, before taking a big step over Bellatrix’s still-bound form on the ground, to get over to where the Lestrange brothers were sitting. “Your father sends this letter to you. I suggest you read it, before the Dark Lord is here.”

Rabastan – the older brother – accepted the roll sealed with the family crest, and rasped out a short word of thanks, breaking the seal and unfurling the letter with trembling hands.

Lucius left the brothers to the message from their father and turned his attention to waiting for the Dark Lord.

ooOoo

Xerxes and he were in the middle of an intense game of chess when Marvolo felt the call from one of his Death Eaters. He sighed. So, not everything had gone smoothly with the escapees. But if he was honest – and he tried to be, at least in his own head – he hadn’t thought it would go without a hitch.

“I’m sorry, Xerxes, I have to go. Lucius has called for me.” Marvolo stood from his arm chair, smoothing down his robes, casting a wandless anti-wrinkle spell, nodding to the suddenly anxious looking man.

He had no time to speak with Xerxes, to discover why he was suddenly worrying. He needed to get to Lucius and the trouble. Briefly Marvolo wondered why he even would want to stay and talk with his friend, before he discarded the thought and secured his hood with a weak sticking charm to prevent it from slipping.

Only a few moments later he reached the point he wanted to apparate from and spun on his heel, concentrating on appearing near to the point Lucius had called him to. Better to be cautious than to be hit by a spell if he should appear in the middle of a battle.

The first he saw, after the sensation of being pressed through a small tube stopped, was a little house in the middle of nowhere. Maybe not exactly nowhere, but there was not much around beside trees.

Cautious, his wand in hand, Marvolo walked to the door of the house purposefully, slipping into the right mindset to intimidate his followers.

The scene meeting his eyes when he stepped into the house was one of battle-aftermath. Several
bodies were lying on the floor, only one of them bound and feebly struggling, furniture had been damaged – judging by the splinters of wood and scraps of fabric and leather littering the floor – and his Death Eaters were trying to sort out the damage.

The healer was checking on a few with bleeding scratches – probably caused by flying wood-splinters – the two Lestrange brothers were reading the letter from Xerxes, and Lucius was waiting by the struggling, bound person.

So this was where Marvolo walked over to, careful to avoid stepping on any of the debris. It would be most undignified if he should slip and fall.

“Report,” he ordered sharply, causing several of the undernourished, haggard-looking wizards to flinch in recognition.

Lucius gave a short, curt bow from the neck before he started with his report. “Three of the escapees are dead, three injured. We met no problems when we arrived. But Bellatrix is more mentally unstable than the rest. She took exception to Healer Greengrass' explanation of the recovery plan. She started firing random spells. All deaths were caused by wild spells from her, my Lord.”

Marvolo was aware that all eyes in the room were trained on him. But there was nothing else to be expected. They all had gone to prison for him. Not the most Slytherin of all possible moves to make, but proof of their loyalty to him. And that was worth something. Before he had regained a body – he was pretty sure about that – he would have seen it as a weakness to be used, but now he felt differently. He was not really sure what it was he felt, but it was not contempt.

“Alecto, Amycus!” He called the two best suited to the task he had to set them to his side. While the two of them made their careful but swift way over to him, Marvolo bend down and picked up a decorative wooden statue. A horse, and a crude one at that.

“Portus,” he murmured, pointing his wand at the sturdy sculpture, causing it to glow a moment with blue light, before the glow vanished, leaving the piece unchanged.

The siblings, hidden behind their masks and robes, came to stand beside him and bowed. Kneeling was not something he demanded of his followers in a place where there could be an attack any moment. He hadn’t done so before, and he was not about to start demanding it now.

“This portkey will take you to an abandoned warehouse on the coast of the Netherlands near a smaller Muggle settlement. I have already stripped it of all tracking charms that were placed there in preparation to hand the location over to the Aurors.” Marvolo started on the explanation of his orders. In the past he never would have bothered to explain. But he had seen that people generally worked better if they knew more. And he hadn’t had a chance to name this place before, simply because Scrimgeour had interrupted him when he said he wanted to move on to the places on the continent. His loss was Marvolo’s gain as the place now came in rather handy.

“Take the bodies of the deceased and stage the place so it looks like the escapees stayed there awhile and then a fight broke out. I trust you know what to do. The portkey will take you back and forth as often as you need. Any questions?” They probably were not able to see the questioningly raised brow under his hood, but they could make out the question in his voice.

“No questions, my Lord,” the male sibling answered, bowing, while his sister extended her hand to accept the portkey.

The two of them vanished in a swirl of colours after speaking the usual activation phrase. To cut
down on the need to communicate, the phrase had always been the same, from the very first portkey he had made for his followers until now. **Might.** Now he was glad that he had chosen this word – at the time mostly because it was short and would be quick to say if needed – because it still fit.

On to the next stage of this expedition: Explaining the changes that had occurred.

But before that...

“Lucius, take Bellatrix to Headquarters. Make her comfortable in one of the guest rooms. Make sure she can’t harm herself or others. Maybe give her a potion to knock her out.” Marvolo waved his hand in a negligent manner.

Lucius bowed, turned, grabbed his sister-in-law – dragging her to her feet – and apparated away.

Taking a deep breath with his back turned to his followers – he could not remember being this nervous about speaking to any of his Death Eaters ever before – to calm down a bit. Then he turned with his back straight and his robes billowing.

“I congratulate you on fleeing Azkaban and making it here. As you might have guessed, there have been many changes since I regained corporeal form.” Marvolo had spotted a few moving pictures among the debris from spells that had missed their targets, concluding that they had managed to get their hands on a few Prophets. “I will give you a short rundown now, before you are moved to a secure location.”

Those that were able to do so, shuffled a little until they were kneeling, facing him, and listening attentively.

“With the help of an almost forgotten law, using my incorporeal form, I got declared not responsible for all past crimes. Fulfilling all preconditions, I managed to secure my birthright to the title of Lord Slytherin and my seat on the Wizengamot.”

In response some of the kneeling Death Eaters cheered, cutting off quickly when he made a sweeping gesture with the hand holding his almost white wand.

“To meet the requirements I adopted a boy capable of speaking parseltongue. You all have heard about him, because going after him robbed me of my body.” Murmurs spread through the small room. “Do not dare lay a hand on my son and heir Henry,” Marvolo warned with a slightly rumbling voice. “Furthermore, information has been revealed that forces us to change our methods to preserve magic and our traditions. Ancestry tests have shown that at least part of those commonly named **muggle-born**, descend from long-lost Squib lines. Lily Evans was a descendant of Slytherin, a young boy once living on the streets of London is a descendant from an old German Family.” Now they looked shocked, and Marvolo was sure they could not absorb any more information. Better to get them to Headquarters.

“Malcolm, arrange for them to be taken to Headquarters. Don’t hesitate to ask for anything you might need to improve their health. I will be in my study if you need anything.”

Almost out the door Marvolo remembered that Xerxes probably would like to speak to his sons, explaining the situation with his heiress. So he turned back to the healer. “Make sure Rabastan and Rodolphus are ready to talk to their father as soon as possible.”

“Of course, my Lord.”

Without further delay, Marvolo strode out of the House and apparated directly to his study in
Headquarters. Landing there, he got rid of his outer robe and filled a tumbler with some whiskey. He needed a drink.

Reading accounts of the effects long-term exposure to Dementors caused in humans – both magical and non-magical – and seeing those effects were two entirely different things.

Hugely different.

To give his mind some time to process what he had seen – and distract himself from unknown feelings raging inside of him – Marvolo sat down, took a sip from his glass, and got out his notes from the bottom drawer on the left-hand side.

Not knowing was worse than knowing a little. Removing knowledge never worked completely. So he had decided to provide a comprehensive account on horcruxes. How to create them, their effects on the one creating them, effects on those exposed to them, associated rituals and safety measures. And – most importantly – why it really was not a good idea to create more than one, if even one at all.

It was a side project that proved to be of some use in his research for a way to free Henry of his soul piece without hurting his son.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published on the 13th of January 2017
Rising Tension

Chapter Notes

For your convenience ;)
It is Monday the 25th of September
The adoption took place on the 11th of July
So it has been roughly two and a half months since the adoption.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rabastan made his way back from the shower in the attached bath to the room he shared with his younger brother. The house his Lord had acquired as Headquarters was quite nice. It clearly had been the house of a wealthy pureblood family. The number of rooms with attached bathrooms attested to the fact that it had been intended either for a big family or as a place to house quite a few guests.

Rubbing his hair dry – he had to conserve his magical strength for the exercises they would start later that day – he walked over to his bed, while his brother got up to take his turn in the bath.

They both were taking extra care this morning, as they would be meeting with their father soon.

Rabastan took up the trousers and shirt laid out on his bed and started to dress. While he listened to the water from the shower next door, the haggard wizard tried to get some semblance of order into the information he had so far gathered.

Somewhere his father had found a girl to replace him as heir. Somehow he was happy that the family would not die with him and his brother. He would have expected to be angry about being replaced seemingly so easily. But there was hardly a chance that either Rodolphus or he had any children they didn’t know about, or were to have any children in the future.

After all, Rabastan was rather sure he never had fathered a child. He had always been careful, and he did prefer wizards over witches beside that. Because of that fact – leaving aside that he was a convicted criminal and now an escaped felon – it was unlikely he would father a child anytime soon.

Starting to button up the nice shirt – the style was a much better fit than the one he had found in that muggle house they had used as a hiding spot – Rabastan once more remembered with fondness the fact that his father had never pressured him into marrying early. Under the influence of the Dementors, he always had remembered the summer he finally had realized that, while he certainly was attracted to women, the attraction to his own gender was much greater. He had been devastated over his fears of either failing in his duties to his family, or being shackled to a woman for the rest of his life.

Now that he was away from that horrible place, he could clearly remember his father's reaction and the reassurances that he had time, and that a child of his brother's could be appointed heir if Rabastan should never find a woman accepting of his tastes.

Shortly after that, Rodolphus had graduated and married almost at the same time. Rabastan had been relieved and had continued with his escapades and his service to the Dark Lord. He really
hoped that his Lord would have a task for him, even though he could never be seen in public again.

Shrugging into the dark blue robe as the last piece of clothing, Rabastan turned to watch his brother walk out of the bath, dripping water all over the floor. He always had been the messier of the two.

“We'll meet down in the kitchen?” They had been told the previous evening that they would get their meals in the kitchen, and that Healer Greengrass would be by again to conduct more thorough exams.

Rodolphus nodded his head, “I will hurry. Do you know where we will meet with Father?”

“Not yet, brother. I guess we probably will meet here, in this house. It would be the safest solution,” Rabastan answered, before he opened the door and walked down towards the stairs. He was rather hungry by now, and the delicious smells of fresh tea, freshly baked bread, and hot bacon drew him down to the kitchen and the others already there.

ooOoo

“A hot bath! Really, I was dreaming of taking a hot bath while sipping on a glass of elf-wine. And I think that is precisely what I will be taking after breakfast: a bath!” Mulciber almost shouted animatedly from the other end of the table. The mood was generally a happy one, now that they were back in a wizarding house, surrounded by magic, eating dishes they had not had in ages.

Not one of them was really affected by the fact that three of their ranks had been killed the night before, just because Bellatrix had lost it.

Rabastan glanced over at his brother. And it didn’t seem as if his brother was particularly bothered by the fact that his wife was currently forced to stay in her room, her wand – or rather, the one she had taken from the lowly wizard on the island – confiscated by their Lord. But maybe that was not really so surprising. It had been years since the both of them had given up hope of having a child, and the witch had turned her back on her husband. Rabastan was fairly certain that she had made her way through the ranks of the Death Eaters, and that she had used her looks to help recruitment for their Lord.

He certainly could understand the other’s resentment towards his wife.

Just as he was draining his second cup of excellent tea, the door opened, and the imposing figure of Xerxes Lestrange came in. He wore robes of high quality and had a bag floating behind him. His eyes roved over the assembled wizards, who were all looking at the one standing in the doorway.

Both Rabastan and Rodolphus stood and made their way over to their father. Short greetings were exchanged, and they left the room.

When they finally reached a small parlor, Xerxes cast a silencing ward on the room, and enveloped his sons – one after the other – in hugs, only to give them two more right after.

“I’m so happy that you two are safe now. I was worried sick when I heard of your escape.” Rabastan could see the relief in his father’s eyes and smiled. Seeing him again after all these years was a wonderful feeling.

“We have seen that there is a Lestrange Heiress now, father,” Rodolphus asked, curious and
They sat down near the fireplace and their father started to tell the story.

“It all began when Marvolo adopted Henry to get the Slytherin Lordship,” their father began, prompting Rabastan to look over to his brother, mouthing “Marvolo?” with wide eyes, only to get a shrug in response.

The brothers listened with rapt attention as their father told about his sister – they had known they had an aunt, but up till now they had not heard much more – and her son. That this son had married, and that their sole daughter was a witch, now going to Hogwarts in the same year as the adopted son of their Lord.

It was a fantastical tale. Of lost lines originating from Squibs cast from their families, of Muggles and a young, intelligent witch and her insatiable thirst for knowledge.

“I have met the Grangers. Polite and cultured people. They have studied to achieve something that equates with a Healer’s Mastery. They are successful with their own business, caring for teeth… I’m glad I took the risk to meet with them, because I have learned so much about the life of Dorcas. And they have been really helpful in planning the school I have founded.”

It was hours later before Rabastan and Rodolphus said farewell to their father and went up back to their room to be examined like the rest of the escapees.

While the Healer set up the ritual around him, placing the runestones on his chest and hands, Rabastan thought about everything father had told him.

Hermione was quite intelligent and willing to learn everything needed to fit in with her world. That was promising. She might have been born to people without magic, but she was willing to learn and adapt. What their father had told them about the Dark Lord’s plans and the reasons for them was quite another matter. It was a little hard to wrap his head around. Especially because there was not really a place for them in those plans. Their father no longer needed them to continue the family. In fact, they could not go home, because the heiress had promised the heir Longbottom that the House of Lestrange would not give shelter to him and his brother.

Only the reassurance that their first priority for now would be to get well again helped Rabastan to lay his doubts and fears to rest.

No need to worry unnecessarily, after all.

At least not at the moment. He sighed and closed his eyes.

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Walking with purposeful steps to the floo room in Malfoy Manor, Lucius checked one more time that the stack of parchment scrolls and folders was tidy under his arm. He was nervous as he had not been for a while now when on his way to face his Lord.

But his lovely, easily irritated – he was sure he must have asked someone to obliviate him after Draco had been born, because he had no recollection of such behaviour from her – wife insisted that she wanted to see and speak with her sister. So it fell to Lucius to ask his Lord for this favour.
The blond wizard was not sure it was such a good idea. Neither to ask his Lord for this meeting, nor to allow his wife to go and meet Bellatrix.

By what he had seen the day before, Bellatrix Lestrange had no restraint left. She would curse anyone denying her something she wanted to have, whoever said something she didn’t want to hear was in danger from her. With maybe the exception of the Dark Lord.

Thinking of the man – one last time checking his appearance in the full-length mirror – Lucius wondered why Bella had not been cursed after she had killed three of them, three of the Dark Lord’s followers, through her careless actions.

Not having a reason for dawdling further, Lucius took a pinch of floo-powder from the ornate silver box with golden inlays sitting on the mantle, throwing it into the flames. Stepping into the now green-glowing fire, Lucius called out “Gryffin House” and was whirled away.

ooOoo

Marvolo stood waiting for Lucius, who would come to prepare for those other Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot who would be meeting at his home today. By what he had been told by Xerxes and Lucius, these meetings before actual sessions of the Wizengamot were the place where the actual work happened.

Groups of people close in political views would come together, trying to convince each other to vote for laws or against them. Most of the time, the host and his – or her – allies would invite a small number of those opposed to them, offer refreshments, and begin arguing.

It seemed the art of this was to know who to invite. One would not want to offer a stage and opportunity for one opposed to what should be lobbied at the meeting, so staunch opponents were usually not invited.

And as Marvolo had been out of the loop – so to speak – for some time, Lucius was coming over early to help him get a feel for those that would be by later in the afternoon.

The fire suddenly changed colour to a vibrant green, and Lucius stepped out of the flames in his usual elegance, an alarmingly big pile of paperwork under one arm.

They exchanged short greetings – a polite nod from Marvolo and a deeper bow from Lucius – and started to walk over the short way to the formal reception room. “Is all this paperwork needed for today?”

Lucius inclined his head. “Sadly, it is, my Lord. The next session is the budgetary session we have this time of year, every year. Deciding which departments will receive what amount of money is a great influence on the direction the Ministry will be taking for the next year. But with all the money and bookkeeping involved, it is maybe the most tedious session of all.”

They sat down in two nice armchairs, Lucius placing the papers on the table between them. In those few moments Marvolo noticed the small tremor in the man’s hands, the signs of perspiration on the aristocratic face, and the nervous glimmer in the blue-grey eyes.

Marvolo pursed his lips. “What is the matter, Lucius?” He was sure that he sounded irritated, but didn’t really care. He was irritated.
The blond wizard swallowed, before taking a fortifying breath. “My wife wants to speak with her sister, my Lord. She insists I ask you for permission to visit her.” At the end Lucius had bowed his head in submission, waiting for the verdict, or a curse to hit him.

Marvolo sighed. “You think it wise to let Narcissa anywhere near Bella? Bella’s state of mind, and with your wife expecting…” he trailed off. It was not exactly acceptable, speaking of pregnancy this early.

Lucius nodded, not daring to raise his eyes to meet his Lord’s red gaze.

“You have my permission to take Narcissa to Headquarters, and for her to visit with her sister. Be sure to keep Narcissa safe. And Bellatrix is not to leave her room!” Marvolo took up the topmost piece of paperwork. “Go now, Lucius,” he dismissed his Death Eater. “I will read what you have brought me in the meantime.”

As commanded, Lucius rose from the chair, bowed, and left without another word while Marvolo started to read the file he had grabbed from the top. He had a lot to read before those people would be visiting.

ooOoo

Narcissa was nervous as she landed beside her husband in a house that had a decidedly gloomy feel to it. In a way the décor – discounting the places on the wall where portraits had been taken down – was familiar, and it took her all the way down a corridor to piece together that this must once have been a house belonging to the Black family.

“How did the Dark Lord manage to get this house, Lucius?” she whispered, curious and willing to take every opportunity for a distraction.

“He never said, love. But ever since he attained a public face, we’ve been called here.” They took another flight of stairs up to another floor, and another hall with doors on both sides. The long dark runner in the middle of the hall had seen better days, and Narcissa delicately lifted the skirt of her dress as well as the hem of her robe. Had the Dark Lord no house elf able to clean this house up?

They stopped before a door that looked no different, to Narcissa’s eyes, from those on both sides. Seeing the dark, brooding look on Lucius’ lovely face made Narcissa’s heart clench. She had almost called him back this morning when she had seen the spark of fear at her plea to see her sister. But she needed to see Bellatrix. They had been so close once. And then Narcissa had been expected Draco, and her sister had distanced herself. The blonde could not let this stand. She had lost one sister to an unsuitable marriage, and one to prison. Now here was a chance to get one of them back, and she just had to take it.

“I will not leave you alone with Bella, my love.” He raised his hand to forestall her protests. “She killed three men last night with wild-flying spells, because she objected to the Healer’s instructions. You will not be alone with her!”

Narcissa nodded in defeat – but she had to concede that this first meeting had best be with Lucius at her side – then followed her husband into the room.

Her eyes fell on what had to be Bellatrix. The witch hunched on the bed looked barely human. Her hair was badly matted – just looking at it made Narcissa’s scalp itch with the thought of fleas and
lice – her eyes sunken deep into her face, the skin pale and pasty. There was nothing left of her oldest sister’s good looks, and the spark of insanity in her eyes hinted at a loss of personality as well.

“What are you doing here, Cissy? Here to belittle me like that blasted healer? Lucius, take me to our Lord! I will not let you keep me from serving the Dark Lord! I, who went to Azkaban for him! You denounced him, traitor!” The voice falling from those chapped lips, that once had been so wonderful, that had spoken soft words to a frightened little blonde girl during a severe thunderstorm…

It felt like a dagger had been thrust into Narcissa’s heart. “Bella, I just wanted to see with my own eyes that you are free at last. Free from Azkaban. I have missed you so much, my only sister.” Now she knew why Lucius had been so reluctant to grant her the wish of visiting her sister. His big, warm hand found hers, and they twined their fingers together.

With a heavy heart, she thought about a way to leave without setting the clearly mentally unstable witch off. Then the door was opened and the younger brother of Lord Greengrass stepped into the room, wand in hand.

Suddenly Bella jumped up from her bed, hands curled into claws, snarling at the wizard, who just stunned her with a silently cast *Stupefy*.

Lucius had dragged Narcissa by her arm out of harm’s way and was now standing between her and her clearly passed-out sister.

“It seems that she has not gotten any better with one night of sleep,” Healer Greengrass drawled, walking over to levitate the witch onto the bed. “Our Lord wants me to assess whether she is able to understand the consequences of her actions, or if she has lost the last of her sanity.” The healer gestured for them to leave, and without a word Narcissa and Lucius left the room and the house. Glad to be away from the madness.

Back in the safety of their home, Narcissa turned to her husband, grabbed his robes, and buried her face in his chest. Silent tears slid down her face. Her sister was lost, she was sure of it. There only remained the question of whether the Dark Lord would kill her himself, or if he would cast her back to the Aurors to further his plans and make his public face more believable.

The strong arms of Lucius around her gave her something solid to hold onto, while she let herself grieve for the sister she had lost to the Dementors.

oooOOooo

Monday morning – before breakfast would begin – the four Heads of House met in the teachers’ lounge for a first cup of tea – or coffee – and a little bit of plotting.

“I have not found any more of my students that have had detention with the toad,” Severus started the exchange of information, sipping on his honey-sweetened coffee.

“I found two of my Gryffindors harmed. A first-year and a fifth-year. All others have valiantly resisted temptation and her baiting,” Minerva added, a scowl etched on her face.

“Five of my Ravenclaws have been targeted by the toad,” Filius growled, showing for all to see the
fierceness of his goblin ancestors, normally deeply buried under his cheerfulness. That got him surprised looks. “They took exception to her not teaching anything useful. It is quite obvious that she suffers critique quite badly.”

That had everyone nodding in agreement. They all had noticed that she was not receptive to any suggestions or ideas to organizing homework assignments, grades, or a lesson plan, shooting their experience down with an air of superiority.

“Quite a few of my Badgers had detention with… her. All in the first week. After that they started to avoid detention, but it seems she makes it hard. Changing rules and making up new ones, just so she can send someone to detention or at least take points,” Pomona said, a sour expression on her face.

“Are all affected students agreeable to talking about what happened?” the Deputy Headmistress asked of her fellow Heads of House.

Nods all around were her answer.

“Good.” She nodded herself, her stern bun preventing her hair from moving at all with the motion. “I will talk to Poppy so she can arrange for exams for all of them. Taking evidence. Filius,” she turned to the Charms Professor, “if you would be so kind as to speak with the Aurors? I believe the Ravenclaws are the next group to be interrogated?” It came out as a question, because she really was not sure.

The short wizard nodded solemnly. “Of course, Minerva. I will inform them and ask what else they need from us, to speed up the process.”

Minerva held out her hand, accepting the small scrolls with the names of the students subjected to the torturous methods of Dolores Umbridge. With a grim expression she stood from her seat. “Make sure that this goes no further than us. No need to give her time to prepare some sort of defence, or get rid of any evidence.”

The others nodded in return, equally grim expressions on their faces. They were each quite different from one another, but one thing they all had in common: they guarded the students put under their care as fiercely as any parent would.

Mr. Slytherin, stay back for a moment,” Severus spoke over the usual chattering and noise at the end of class, while the students gathered their belongings and cleared away their disastrous attempts at today’s potion.

He watched, leaning back against his desk, while Slytherin sent his friends ahead of him, shouldering his bag and walking over to his teacher.

He noticed with satisfaction that the potions he was supplying for his Lord’s heir were doing their work. The boy looked healthier than in past years, and he had grown another inch. Maybe the healer should re-evaluate the strength of the nutrient potion the boy was taking. He would suggest such the next time he had time to speak with the man.

Knowing that this would be the best opportunity to deliver the packet he had been carrying around
since the previous evening, or rather night, Severus had planned to have a reason to speak with the Gryffindor.

“You wanted to speak with me, sir?” asked the boy, looking up to Severus through glasses that no longer looked as if they would fall apart any moment.

“Yes. First, your father asked me to deliver this to you,” Severus began, handing over the small packet wrapped up in parchment. “And second, I wanted to confirm that our lessons in remedial potions,” he let a brow rise, suggesting he was talking about more than Potions, “will continue on Wednesday evenings in the next weeks.”

A head topped with unruly dark hair bobbed in an agreeable nod. “Thank you, sir. And I will be here on Wednesday for our next lesson.” The boy hesitated a moment, visibly gathering his courage, before he spoke once more, fiddling with the strap of his bag. “Will the girl be okay? And what are you going to do…”

Holding up a hand, effectively shutting the boy up, Severus gave a quick and quite explanation. “She will be perfectly fine. And let us professors handle the situation. It most likely will take some time, but we are working on it. And that should be enough for you. Keep avoiding her baiting, and help the other Gryffindors to do the same. And now you should hurry up before you miss a meal.”

“Yes, sir,” was the curt response, delivered with a short half-bow from the neck, and then the boy was gone.

Now Severus would wait for Minerva to confirm that Filius had spoken with the Aurors so he could report some progress to his Lord.

ooOoo

Dolores sat in her chair at the high table, watching over the four house tables slowly filling with students. Today the aggravating chatter was almost absent, the students only whispering among each other, but mostly only concentrating on their meals.

The silence seemed to stretch to the other professors as well, only increasing her good mood. Her methods were finally gaining the success she had been aiming for. Discipline had been rather lacking when she had arrived here, but after she had made a few examples for each House, acting up in her lessons had rapidly declined.

And finally her efforts were bearing fruit. A smug smile graced her face, as she filled her plate with her favourite greens and started to eat, reveling in the cowed atmosphere in the Great Hall.

ooOoo

The tension in the Great Hall during lunch was so thick it was almost tangible. The story about Umbridge's detentions had made it through the school in record time. And that the Heads of House were angry was a well known fact as well.
For the first time in a long while, all four Houses had the same undivided opinion of one of the professors. Without any doubt, Dolores Umbridge was the worst professor they had ever had. She had hurt students of all four Houses, and she was not teaching anyone anything worthwhile.

Lockhart had been bad as well, but in his case, the girls had liked his good looks and flashy behaviour, and he had not hurt anyone.

While the witch clad entirely in pink was eating vegetables with a smug and self-satisfied look, the rest of the school was waiting for the explosion to happen.

Betting pools were started on when and how she would be removed from the school.

After an evening spend revising under the stern guidance of their best friend Hermione, Ron and Harry were walking up the stairs to the Gryffindor dorms. Both were too tired to talk much, and Ron only mumbled a “Good night,” to Harry as the green-eyed teen continued on his way to the top of the tower – passing by the room used by the Head Boy when he happened to be a Gryffindor – and his room.

Under his fatigue, Harry was excited. He wanted to test out the mirror Snape had given him after Potions, wanted to try if it would work. Letters were nice, but to speak with the man the same way he could to Sirius would be even better.

In a way, it felt strange that he was so eager to speak with Marvolo, the wizard that was a Dark Lord. No sense in denying what he knew. He even was sure that Marvolo knew that Harry was aware of the fact.

Shaking his head to wake up a bit more and to get his mind away from the gloom and guilt – it always loomed when he remembered that he liked Marvolo and that the wizard was responsible for Harry’s being an orphan – Harry walked into his room, closing the door behind himself and setting his bag down.

Carefully unpacking the scrolls with today’s essays on his desk, Harry got the small package wrapped in parchment and sealed with the Slytherin crest out from a small pocket on the inside of his book-bag. Harry eagerly broke the seal and unwrapped the mirror.

It was a shiny mirror made from a silvery metal – maybe it actually was silver – etched with runes in a decorative, meandering pattern. In the middle of the back there was an inlay of a serpent and a lion, sitting peacefully next to each other.

The mirror his godfather had given to him had more of a utilitarian look about it. Considering that they had made them while still in school, Harry didn’t think the Marauders had put any effort or overly much money into their creation.

The parchment the mirror had been wrapped in was a short note, explaining what the mirror could do, and at the same time was an invitation to use the mirror any time he wanted to. Marvolo promised to keep the mirror’s counterpart on his person at all times.

Getting rid of his shoes, the tie, and the robes, Harry got comfortable. With the mirror in his hand he sat down on his bed, back to the headboard, and stretched his legs out comfortably.
Harry hissed at the mirror, now hardly needing to concentrate on the image of a snake to slip into parseltongue. Practice makes perfect.

Only a moment later the mirror showed the face of Marvolo, red eyes and carefully styled hair, instead of Harry’s own reflection.

“Henry! I see you have received the mirror.” In the background Harry could see the dreary walls of a rather large room passing by as Marvolo moved, and a few figures clothed in something black, kneeling on the floor. But soon a door closed and the low murmurs that had started the moment Marvolo had turned his back on the crowd were muffled.

“The notes your godfather lent me were really helpful. I hope you like the mirror I found in Diagon.” Marvolo sounded rather relaxed. And Harry felt anything but.

By the few things he had seen, his guardian had been in the middle of a Death Eater meeting when Harry had called. And he had accepted Harry’s call on the mirror despite that fact. The teenaged wizard was not quite sure how to feel about this.

Until now it had been rather easy to separate Marvolo from Voldemort. And in a way, both were still distinctly different beings. Voldemort had been the insane wizard acting on the fragment of an overheard prophecy, while Marvolo was the adult caring about Harry’s success in school, his health, and happiness.

And both of them were Dark Lords. Harry felt incredibly confused. And by the way Marvolo looked at him, it was written all over his face.

A sigh made its way over the mirror to Harry’s ear. “I think that I should inform you that the escapees have been contacted. They will no longer pose a risk to our society.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “No longer a risk? Are they dead, or back in prison?”

“Neither.” Marvolo shook his head, making the hair near his collar swing a little. “Well, that’s not actually the whole truth. Three of them died in an argument. But the rest of them have been brought to a secure location to recover and regain their senses.”

Harry blinked, a little dumbfounded. He was aware that all of this was shared under the Slytherin family oath, but still… he was not accustomed to getting information freely. That Marvolo had increasingly shared information with him via letter in the past weeks was totally new to Harry.

“And then?” Harry could not stop himself from asking. What would Marvolo do with them once they were healthy again? In the same moment Harry realized that his call had interrupted what probably was an important meeting. “Sorry, sir, that I interrupted the meeting, sir. I can call again tomorrow?” Harry hated how insecure he sounded. Showing how much he had come to like the attention he was getting from Marvolo probably was not a good idea. The man was an expert in manipulating people and using their weaknesses against them. A lot of the lessons this summer had proven that fact.

“No need to apologize, Henry. I wrote that you can call me anytime. And I meant it. This way they will know what the priorities are. Was there something specific you wanted to ask, or tell me?” The relaxed way Marvolo spoke confused Harry and he no longer remembered if there had been anything in particular he had wanted to tell, or if he simply had wished to test the mirror.

“I just wanted to see that the mirrors work. And they do… so… have a good evening?” The last came out more like a question, and Harry hated it. Why was he so insecure all of a sudden? And
the moment he had thought this, he knew. The way the Dursleys always had treated him, Harry had come to crave attention and approval. Marvolo had given both to him for things normal parents gave their children approval for. As far as he was aware, at least. And somehow he now feared that he would lose this.

Reflecting on his emotions and their reasons had become a habit that he at times found annoying. But he guessed mind-healing would do that to anyone.

“How are the Potions lessons going? And Ancient Runes?” It looked as if Marvolo had taken a seat in a chair, in no rush to get back to the crowd of kneeling people in the other room.

“I think I’m doing fine in Ancient Runes. It’s much better than Divination.” Harry said with feeling. He had hated the constant death predictions. “And since Snape… Professor Snape,” Harry corrected hastily, “now treats me more fairly and doesn’t pick so much on me, and with the Sly… others not throwing random things into my cauldron… Potions is going much better.”

“That’s good. I wish you to do your best in your classes, Henry. This is your OWL year, after all. They are very important.”

An awkward silence fell between them, and Harry watched in fascination as a slight blush of embarrassment rose in Marvolo’s cheeks. The Dark Lord cleared his throat and smiled as Harry yawned. “It seems that you are in need of your bed, Henry. Sleep well, my son.”

“Thank you... and good night,” was Harry’s answer before the mirror reverted back to a reflective surface.

While Harry went through his nighttime ablutions, his mind jumped all over the place. When he finally doused the light and crawled under his warm and comfortable covers, starting the exercises to calm and clear his mind, Harry came to the conclusion that he had started to feel that Marvolo was family. And he was not entirely sure if that was a good thing or not. He had always wished for a proper family. Not like the Dursleys, but someone that would care for him because he was Harry. But was it right to find that family in the man that had killed his parents?

ooOoo

Smiling, Marvolo placed the mirror back in his pocket before he rose from the chair he had sat down in, to go back to his Death Eaters.

As he swept through the door, he was pleased to see that they were all still where he had left them. In neat rows, in a half-circle, on their knees, waiting for him to return.

“To make the priorities clear: I want to preserve magic and our traditions. Going to war over it, killing wizards and witches, or bringing our existence to the Muggles’ attention by randomly killing them, will not achieve this.” His red eyes bored into some confused ones from his newly returned followers and into the attentive eyes of those that had watched the changes taking place. “We have to act differently to achieve those goals. With Henry as my son, I’m able to work through the Wizengamot. It will take lo…”

A wail from the only witch among his followers interrupted Marvolo in the middle of his speech. She had almost jumped to her feet, shaking in rage she pointed a wand at Marvolo – giving it back to her had been a calculated move, and maybe an error – her eyes crazy with madness.
“You are bewitched, my Lord! The Dark Lord never would talk such nonsense! No, no, no, no…” Her hand was shaking and Marvolo changed his stance a little to be ready to move at the slightest indication that she would cast a spell. There was no knowing what she would do. It seemed his hope that she could be saved was in vain.

With wild eyes she turned to the confused wizards kneeling on the floor around her. “Can’t you see? Someone has done something to him! A confundus? Imperius? Can’t you see?!?” She obviously was desperate and incapable of understanding that Marvolo was perfectly fine and acting under his own free will.

Red eyes sought out the dark ones of his most trusted. While Bella spewed more of her confused questions, getting more frantic by the second, the Potions Master’s eyes met his and Marvolo quickly projected an image of a stunner cast by Severus knocking Bellatrix out from behind into the other man’s mind.

“You all have lost your minds!” Bella screamed and started to cast silent spells without true aim or any pattern that Marvolo could see, while he dove for the ground, his own wand snapping into his hand, casting a silent shield charm over himself.

A sharp pain stabbed him as he watched Bellatrix Lestrange crumble to the ground under the stunner Severus had cast. She had been such a promising young witch when he had first met her. He had seen the potential in her, her eagerness to prove herself worthy, to help regain parts of their traditions and heritage buried under the wish to get the Muggleborn to stay by making their world more familiar to them.

And then he had started to bend her to his will, his purpose, destroying all of that potential. He had fostered to her tendency to enjoy tormenting others, using the techniques military all over the world had used for a very long time to get people to be willing to kill for a cause. He had ruined her, and this realisation hit him hard.

But now was not the time to dwell on this. There were others who had sworn their lives to his service. He had to make sure they were not harmed or injured, that his past actions would not ruin them, too.

“What Malcolm, check if there is anyone injured. Lucius, secure Bellatrix, take her wand and lock her in her room.” Marvolo barked out his orders, then closed his eyes for a moment, taking calming breaths. The pain in his chest where he felt it when one of his Death Eaters called for him was not really lessening, and he was sure some part of the old fealty spell he had used in the creation of the Dark Mark was making itself known.

It took a little less than an hour to sort everything out reasonably well, time that Marvolo used to come up with a plan to save those of his sworn followers he was able to save. The pain over the fact that he would have to sacrifice one of them to do so was burning near his heart. And guilt was coiling in his stomach.

Now the Death Eaters were standing around him in a circle, and as Lucius came back in from placing Bellatrix in a cell – that was what the guest room was, even if it was a more comfortable one than those in Azkaban – Marvolo took another deep breath and started to pass out orders for his plan.

“Severus, we will need Polyjuice, lots of it.” The Potions Master nodded. “Amycus, Alecto, you will impersonate those that have fled and make appearances all over the continent. I will provide you with locations and places that seem logical.” The twins nodded as well, looks of excitement in their eyes. They were the kind of people who liked an adventure.
“We will let the world believe that you are killing each other off, fleeing from Britain. In the meantime, I will think on what you have to offer to our cause, and what needs to be done to give you back a life worth living.”

A nod from Malcolm signalled that there had not been any serious injuries, and with a lighter heart Marvolo searched out Augustus in the crowd. “Augustus, for a start I wish you to go through the mess the Ministry has made out of the declaration of what is part of The Dark Arts. Identify what has no place being called Dark, categorize the rest, and formulate explanations and definitions of what should be considered Dark.” A spark of interest gleamed in the eyes of the former Unspeakable, this was an assignment the man would love to work on.

Feeling a headache forming, Marvolo waved a hand at them all. “You know what to do. Get to it! Malcolm, I want to speak with you.” He would need a headache potion and probably a Dreamless Sleep as well.

Once he was home he would write a letter to Henry. He needed to explain a little more about what would happen in the near future, and why he was doing what he was planning to do. Giving his son information seemed to be crucial for the development of a trusting relationship between them.

It was really early on Tuesday morning when four Aurors met in one of the staff rooms at the Ministry. Passing around mugs of freshly brewed coffee – later in the day the quality would decline as the drink sat, being held warm by charms – John contemplated what they should do next.

Beside him sat Shacklebolt – as far as he knew, a member of Dumbledore’s Order – cradling a mug in his hands, not yet wholly awake. The two still working on the murder attempt on Heir Slytherin at Hogwarts – Proudfoot and Savage – were sitting on the other side of the table, equally bleary-eyed. As they were all working on murder attempts on Heir Slytherin, they had agreed to meet and compare notes, so to speak.

“We found the order that sent the Dementors after the teenagers,” Shacklebolt started the conversation. “Sadly, the name is fabricated, there is no Jane Smith working anywhere in the Ministry. Any magical traces are useless, because the form was weeks at Azkaban near others before we found it.” The dark-skinned auror – the dark crimson of their uniform was a flattering colour for him – sighed, taking a sip from his coffee.

“Is there a way to take fingerprints with magic?” Savage asked between two sips of his black coffee.

“Fingerprints?” John asked, his thoughts miles away, ruminating over the happenings at the meeting the previous evening. He filled his own cup with coffee and added a generous splash of milk to it. “What are fingerprints?”

“One of the Muggleborn told me about them. See the fine lines on the tips of your fingers?” He held up his hand to demonstrate his point. “They form patterns, and those are different from one person to another. Not quite the same on two people. So the muggles use them to prove that someone was somewhere or touched something, because they left fingerprints behind.” The man shrugged. “If there was a spell to make them visible and compare them or something…” He trailed off, blushing in embarrassment under the confused looks of the other three.
Shacklebolt cleared his throat, breaking the awkward silence. “Never heard of a spell like that. And Moody was one of my instructors. But it sounds like something that would be useful, if it did exist.”

Looking at his own hands, John noticed the faint swirls and lines on the tips of his fingers. And those were different between different people? If so, that would be pretty useful indeed. “Maybe we can get one of the Unspeakables to develop a spell for us?” he suggested, letting his hands fall to the table, gripping the cup.

“Maybe,” Proudfoot agreed, emptied his cup, and moved on to another topic. “We have interrogated a good part of the students and have a few suspects. We will need to either question them under Veritaserum or examine their memories.”

Jon looked up – that was something his Lord would want to know – and asked his question with an arched brow. “What are their names? Do you think the Wizengamot will agree to those measures?”

Savage tipped his head from side to side, answering slowly. “If we can get the Lords Slytherin, Malfoy, and Nott to work together on this, they might be able to make it happen.”

John almost snorted, the Dark Lord had made it abundantly clear that his son and heir had top priority. He would make it happen. “I think Lord Slytherin is likely to pull all the strings he can. And the other Lords will help. An attack on three heirs? They won’t let that rest.”

Proudfoot snorted in agreement. “They will let something slide if no House is involved, but something like this? You are right, Dawlish, they will make sure it happens… as long as there is no heir among the suspects.”

“And is there?” Shacklebolt wanted to know. And John looked on in interest as well. If he got a name out of this, he could collect points with his Lord.

“We can’t talk about it, Shacklebolt. And you know it. On another note, we have evidence proving that a Hogwarts professor is torturing students. And that will be a difficult case.”

“Torturing students?” John couldn’t believe that he had heard this.

“The new Defence professor. Umbridge. Fudge assigned her to the post. She’s the one pushing those creature laws in the past years,” Savage summarized, adding the last explanation to erase all doubts about her identity.

That got nods from the other aurors. The woman was unpleasant, and known for that fact, but she always had had a favoured position in the Minister’s eyes. To mount charges against her wouldn’t be an easy task.

“Who brought the evidence to you?” Shacklebolt asked one of the more crucial questions.

“All four Heads of House. With medical information and names of students from all four Houses that are willing to speak about it,” Proudfoot answered, levitating the coffee over to refill his cup.

John leaned back in his chair, making it creak in protest, toying with the empty mug. “Any child of notice among those affected?” They all knew if there was a child of an important family among the students tortured by the Professor, all their efforts would run more smoothly. Until now, John had never been among those less fortunate, but he guessed much harm could be prevented if they got Umbridge into Azkaban before she targeted influential families.
Proudfoot shook his head, sighing sadly. “Only half-bloods and muggle-born students, as far as we can tell.” He rubbed his brow, frowning. “But maybe they're related to some influential family and just don’t know? With that Granger girl being related to the Lestranges, and Harry Potter a descendant of Slytherin…” he trailed off, shaking his head. “When did the world get that bloody complicated?”

None of them answered, but they all silently agreed. Lately the world had become much more complicated. John was not sure if he would prefer the simpler world they seemed to have left behind.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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During breakfast on the 26th of September, Harry got a letter – as usual, written in the squiggly lines of Parselscript – from Marvolo, and while around him his house mates ate their breakfast, trying to wake up properly, Harry bent over the letter, concentrating deeply as he read.

**Dear Henry,**

_After what you saw yesterday evening I thought I should explain a little more of what I intend to do._

_You certainly remember the lesson on the Slytherin fealty spell we had in the summer? It was one of those I used to create the Dark Mark that I placed on each of my followers. Under normal circumstances, this spell would forge a connection between the Lord and the vassal based on obligations each of them owes the other._

_Now, with the return of two of the bigger parts of my soul, I feel the obligations of the Lord to his vassals for the first time. I have to assume that I didn’t feel it before because my soul was too mangled, killing my ability to feel much of anything._

_These obligations, paired with the fact that the escapees are only in the situation they are in because of actions I took, orders I gave them, compel me to help them. Considering that those who renounced me after that night, managed to lead more or less normal lives, integrating themselves into society, I hope those that went to Azkaban can change their ways too._

_If you have any suggestions on how they can lead productive lives, let me know. I would appreciate your input._

_I hope you will call on the mirror after classes_

_Marvolo_

Harry had to agree that it seemed as if people like Lucius Malfoy had managed to lead a life following the rules – more or less – once Voldemort had been out of the picture. The teenager was not sure that the man had actually lived by the law, but if he had engaged in attacking, killing, or torturing Muggles, it had never been discovered.

Either way, Harry understood what Marvolo was talking about. The bond created by that spell went both ways, ensuring that a Lord cared for his vassals, rewarding and protecting them.

The rest of the day, Harry thought about this new information in every free minute he had.
After that morning the days started to blur into one another. Harry made two mirror calls each day: one to Marvolo, and one to Sirius. During those calls he learned that Marvolo had spent a delightful afternoon helping Lord Lestrange enchant a bus for the school to collect the children who were living with their families. And how Sirius was fighting with the Black Library to find the family chronicles and search for Squib relatives.

Besides those – usually short – calls, Harry exchanged regular letters with his godfather and his guardian. While Sirius wanted to know how the Quidditch training was going, and regaled his godson with funny stories he had found in the chronicles – like the incident involving a blueberry pudding, resulting in the need to renovate an entire sitting room – Marvolo asked after Harry’s lessons and told about the school Xerxes Lestrange was building with the help of Hermione’s parents. It was a strange experience to write letters and receive them so regularly, but it made Harry happy.

And he needed every bit of happiness he could get. Essays were now longer than ever and much more complicated. As were the lessons. Heavy with theory and practical application... except in Defence.

Those lessons posed an entirely different challenge.

Umbridge had not stopped her petty attempts to get Harry into detention. And with the exceedingly boring chapters they had to read, the essays demanded of them to write reasons why they did not need to know any offensive or even defensive spells, her perpetually smug look and condescending smile, her comments to them as if they were barely six years old, all this forced Harry to use the skills he had learned from Professor Snape over the summer to keep his cool.

The Gryffindors spent more than one evening in the common room ranting over Umbridge, imagining the most gruesome ways the “Defence Curse” could remove her from the school. As everyone knew, no Professor stayed longer than a year. And looking back on the last four professors – vanished without a trace for Quirrell, obliviated of all memories for Lockhart, outed as a werewolf for Lupin, and imprisoned for a year for Moody – most of their ideas didn’t sound too outlandish.

The twins were working on perfecting their snacks enabling students to be sent to the infirmary because they were ill. Most Gryffindors were wary of trying them, but the tedious lessons with Umbridge made the most desperate willing to risk almost anything.

Harry was just glad that no one had tried to prank him again. He hoped that it would stay that way.

Studying became one of the activities eating most of Harry’s time. Half of his evenings he met up with Luna and the Slytherins in the library, to work on Runes and Potions, sometimes accompanied by Hermione, who liked to work with Daphne on their Arithmancy problems. All other evenings, or more accurately all evenings, another study session was held in the common room. Harry was not sure why he had not noticed how much work the fifth-years had in the years previous.

One remarkable event was the one evening just before dinner, when they started an impromptu chess match in the Great Hall. Theo, Draco, Harry, and Ron sat down at the Hufflepuff table – house lines had started to blur during the study hours before dinner under the constant pressure of Umbridge's treating them all like little kids – playing two games of chess, with the plan that the winner of each game would play against each other. They quickly attracted a crowd, watching
silently. After Ron predictably had won the game against Harry, and Theo had lost by a hair's breadth against Draco, the Slytherin and the Gryffindor started to play a vicious battle. Dust from smashed chess-pieces settled over the board and the pieces not involved in the thick of it banged their tiny swords against their tiny shields, creating quite a ruckus for their size.

Sadly, they never got to know who would have won, because when dinner appeared they had to cut the game short, returning to their respective tables. Sitting next to his friend, Harry thought that it might be possible for his friends from different Houses not to fight over him. It had been an uneasy truce, but a truce was a truce, either way.

That there still were two Aurors at the school, investigating the attack down at the Quidditch pitch, went largely unnoticed or acknowledged by the students. Only that no practice for any Quidditch team was held without supervision from Hooch, was a clear indicator that the staff suspected that danger was still around. Meanwhile, the two Aurors continued to interrogate students from all Houses. The joke went around that they had no desire to leave the castle and were working deliberately slowly only because they could stay as long as they were not finished with their investigation.

On several mornings a week, the Daily Prophet would bring news of sightings of the Death Eaters to the school. Mostly it stated one or two of them had been seen by a Muggle or wizard or witch, somewhere on the continent. The Prophet was eager to report any and all rumours and all the speculation they could come up with. But mostly the British magical community seemed to relax a bit, as it became clear that the Death Eaters had fled to the continent and were no imminent threat.

Hermione, naturally, was tempted to draw a map of Europe and the route the Death Eaters seemed to take as a way to predict where they would be next. Ron pointed out that the Aurors might have thought of that, discouraging Hermione somewhat.

All in all, Harry was surprised when he woke up one morning and it already was October, the first month of his fifth year finished.

Draco sat between Theodore and Millicent, Vincent and Gregory across from them. The boys mostly were just eating and drinking strong tea, while Millicent was chatting happily with Daphne sitting on her other side. This Wednesday morning – October the fifth – was a totally normal morning at Hogwarts.

Everything was back to a normal, boring life.

Or maybe not entirely normal. The evening before, Draco had received a letter from his parents. One he had waited for with dread, trying to forget it was even happening. Who would want to know anything about their parents' sex-life? But now it seemed like it was really happening. He was to be an older brother.

Judging by the smile on Theo’s face whenever he got a letter from the young wizard Lord Nott had adopted – Draco was too tired to remember the little boy’s name – being a big brother was not really that bad. And with the nanny elf still living at the Manor, it wasn’t as if he would be required to change the nappies or anything gross like that.
But still he had worried enough that it had taken hours of tossing and turning before he had found sleep, resulting in his current tired state. They all knew, of course, that the families were about to grow. The Dark Lord had ordered as much. Besides activities Draco and the others would rather not think about, the search for outcasts in the past of their families was ongoing. As far as Draco knew, his father had found at least five Squibs, and had set some Muggle to the task of following their trail through the muggle world.

He grabbed another piece of toast and looked around for the pot of honey, spotting it further down by the second-years.

He was about to call to one of them to pass the pot back up, when the doors to the Great Hall opened – not an entirely novel event, as there was someone late almost every morning – and four figures dressed in the crimson robes of the Auror Corps walked into the Hall. All with wands in hand. Toast and honey forgotten, Draco watched the Aurors’ progress between the long crowded student tables towards the table where the professors were seated.

Why were they here? Had they found the culprit of the attack in September? But why should they be walking up to the teachers' table if they were here to take one of the students into custody?

The chatter in the Hall fell silent like a wave following the progress of the Aurors and the nudging some students gave to those sitting beside them once they had spotted the four crimson-robed wizards and witches.

The professors were looking up as well, and the Headmaster stood and walked out from behind the table to greet the new arrivals.

Some students farther from the Head Table were standing now, trying to see over those sitting nearer to where the action most likely was to take place.

“Has anyone heard what's going to happen?” Draco whispered to those sitting around him, getting quiet murmurs stating that, no, they had not heard anything, in response, while the question was passed on to the others up and down the table. But if his father had not told him anything, Draco doubted that any of the other parents had told their children. If they even knew beforehand what would happen.

They all watched as the Headmaster and one of the Aurors had a short, murmured discussion, and they all got to see a surprised Headmaster. Not something that did happen often. What happened even less often were the smug looks on the faces of all four Heads of House.

Draco’s eyes narrowed. They obviously had known what was to happen. He had never seen Snape and McGonagall working together.

His thoughts were interrupted when one of the Aurors – probably the most senior one in charge of the mission – stepped around the Headmaster and addressed someone at the Head Table. From his position Draco couldn’t see who it was the man was looking at. But as he started to speak it was clear.

“Dolores Jane Umbridge, you are under arrest for the unauthorised use of a blood quill on minors. Hand over your wand and follow us to the Ministry, where you will await your trial, Madame Umbridge,” stated the wizard in a clear, commanding voice, easy to hear into every corner of the Great Hall, as all the students had fallen silent once more the moment their most hated teacher's name had been called out.

The witch, as always clad in pink – because she had no fashion sense at all – flustered and shrieked
indignantly at the Auror and his colleagues. “How dare you! I’m Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, appointed to the office of Defence Professor by Cornelius himself. Speak with him! He told me I should make sure that discipline at the school would no longer slip so badly!” By the end of her tirade her face had attained an ugly shade of red, clashing horribly with her pink sweater and rosé robes.

“I have here an order signed by the Minister to take you into custody. Now follow us quietly or we will use force.” The stances the other three Aurors were adopting were more menacing. All had their wands out, ready to act on a moment's notice.

For a moment Draco thought she would actually leave with the Aurors, there was no way she could get around it. But it seemed as if she was not thinking the same. She pushed her chair back and ran as fast as she was able – not really fast in Draco’s opinion – towards the teachers’ entrance to the Hall. The door leading to the ante-chamber that had been used last year during the tournament.

The second Umbridge decided to run, the Aurors took action, sending stunners after the fleeing Umbridge, forcing the other professors to dodge. Then one of the stunners landed in the middle of her back, sending the short witch tumbling forward onto her face.

And with thundering applause the students at all four House tables jumped to their feet.

Draco smirked. Umbridge had been the most hated teacher in all his time at Hogwarts, and maybe ever since the beginnings of the school.

“That’s the fastest we ever got rid of a Defence Professor,” mused Theo.

“Who will take over the position in the middle of the year? What do you think?” Daphne asked as they watched Umbridge being floated by one of the Aurors along the tables and out of the door. Chatter rose around them, the other Houses probably asking the very same questions.

“I have no idea, Daphne. But we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves. There is a chance she will be found not guilty,” Draco said with exaggerated poise, startling the others into snorts and laughter.

A few moments later Draco could not hold himself back and joined in the merriment around him. Hopefully there would be a new teacher, and if they were lucky, it would be a competent one.

ooOoo

Albus turned to his staff, wondering if he was losing influence here as well. They all had reacted as if they had expected something like this to happen. Turning to Severus – the most pliable among his staff, doing what Albus wanted because of his tremendous feelings of guilt – he composed his face into the most crestfallen expression he could manage.

“Why have you not told me that she was using a blood quill on the students? I could have done something. It was my responsibility to do something!” His mind was racing. He needed to maintain control, and he needed to find a substitute for Dolores.

Severus started to speak but Minerva was faster. “We all knew. And we decided in concert that Dolores has too many… contacts... in the Ministry to risk forewarning her. If we had told you, you would have been obligated to tell her to change her ways, Albus. Effectively warning her.”
It was concerning how all the others were nodding along. If they continued working together like this, he might lose even more control over what was happening. He could not allow that to happen, but had no idea how to prevent it.

He would need to contact the Order members in the Ministry, so that he would be informed about what happened around this travesty.

oooOOooo

They all were sitting in their respective seats, trying to stay awake while the n-th Head of a Department held his – or her, in this case it was his – little speech about why the Department had to get much more money for the next year.

Marvolo felt that he had heard every possible argument at least three times by now. And they were only half done. On occasions like this he mourned a little for the good old times, when killing people was all he had to think about. Well, that was not actually true. Conquering the world with violence was tedious as well. Recruiting, the planning of attacks, blackmailing… that all was hard work too, but most of the time it was not boring. Not like this session. It was driving Marvolo crazy, kindling the urge to crucio someone to get some of the tension out of his shoulders. Now he knew why Lucius and the others had seemed so enthusiastic about the budgeting session.

The current Head of a Department – Marvolo had not really paid attention as he had decided what he wanted to vote on which way earlier – was replaced by a young witch, who nervously straightened her robes before she started to speak.

She had barely managed to get into the reasons why her Department needed more funds – she was the Head and only worker of the Department, it had something to do with art – before an Auror entered through the door, hurrying over to Madame Bones and whispering something in her ear urgently.

Just as Marvolo’s attention had shifted the moment the Auror came through the door, the attention of all other Lords and Ladies had shifted as well, leaving the poor lone witch carrying on her speech while glowering at them all for their disrespect.

They all watched Madame Bones nodding at the scribe, who passed a note to the Chief Warlock, who in turn stood and pounded his gavel to call their attention.

“We have to interrupt the budgeting session in favour of an emergency trial for Dolores Jane Umbridge for the deliberate torture of several minor witches and wizards at the School for Witchcraft and Wizardry of Hogwarts.” He spoke in a grave tone, loud enough for all to hear, and was promptly drowned out under the noise caused by the mutterings and murmurs of the Lords and Ladies.

It took several loud bangs from the scribe’s wand to get the attention of all in the chamber back to the Chief Warlock. Marvolo looked on the mayhem with satisfaction. He had – of course – known of the planned arrest, but had not believed that it would come to a trial this fast. He wondered what had happened to fast-track the proceedings. Under normal circumstances the accused got several days time to speak with a solicitor, to review evidence and plan a defence strategy. This time was
used by the law enforcement as well, but it was there for the benefit of the accused.

“Undersecretary Umbridge insists on a quick trial because she wishes for this matter to be resolve quickly, preventing any rumours or slander to spread. We will come together after a short tea break for everyone to refresh and the room to be set up. Be back in half an hour.” Another bang with the gavel, and the members of the Wizengamot stood, congregating together into groups, talking animatedly over the new interesting turn in the day’s agenda.

Marvolo stood as well, stretching out his back and arms, wondering what Dolores Umbridge thought she would gain by insisting on a quick trial. Surely she didn’t believe the Minister would cover for her? Glamoured blue eyes sought out the Minister in his ugly plum-coloured robes, spotting him standing next to Madame Bones, attentively listening to what the witch was telling him. The man looked a little pale, and subdued, not like someone ready to help an ally out of a difficult position.

With the others firmly on his side – he had told them of what he and his heir had found as soon as he found time – and the Lords and Ladies leaning to the lighter side of the spectrum surely not condoning torture on anyone, least of all children, Marvolo was confident that they would manage to get the witch into Azkaban, if not outright Kissed.

As he was not really hungry, and didn’t feel the need to drink something, Marvolo decided that he would do something now that he had had planned for the end of the session.

Lord Black was found quickly among the supporters of what was left of Dumbledore’s agenda, and the Dark Lord in hiding started to weave his way through the crowd over to his son’s godfather.

“Lord Black, if I may have a moment of your time,” Marvolo addressed the dark-haired animagus, ignoring the sceptic looks of the others standing around them. A few looked insulted, but Marvolo really didn’t have time to wait for a lull in the conversation. And it was better to ask now with ample of time, than later when the time to plan would be much shorter.

Grey eyes narrowed and a brow rose in question. “Whatever for, Lord Slytherin?”

Marvolo ignored the tone Lord Black was using, instead answering the question politely. “I wanted to speak with you about something concerning Henry. If we might find a quieter place?”

Suspicion was quickly replaced by worry, only to vanish behind an emotionless mask a moment later. “Under these circumstances… follow me.” Lord Black turned, making his excuses to his conversation partners and made his way over to one of the small alcoves along one of the walls.

When they reached the spot, Marvolo cast a privacy ward and turned to face Lord Black. Taking a deep breath he steeled himself against the outburst he expected to come. “I suspect that no one has taken Henry to see his parents’ grave.” He watched anger manifest on the other wizard’s face, and hurried to speak so he could get out what he had come to say, before the other would blow up. “And as the anniversary of their death nears, I think he might want to visit. As it is obvious it would be inappropriate for me to take him, and I think he should get the opportunity, I’m asking you, Lord Black, if you would be willing to take Henry to see his parents’ grave.” The anger gave way to confusion, and Marvolo was relieved. A scene in the middle of the Wizengamot Chambers was not what he needed. Lord Black’s rigid stance, his hand near his wand, relaxed a little.

“I have not spoken with Henry about this. I expect that he will be more open to the idea if you were to bring it up, Lord Black.” When the man didn’t answer but just stared at Marvolo, the older wizard prodded. “What do you say?”
Black shook himself like a dog getting rid of water from its pelt, letting his hands fall down to his sides. “I guess you’re right about Harry never seeing the grave. I haven't seen it either… I'll bring it up and take him when he wishes to go. It’s a Tuesday this year... “

“I'll take care of that, I wanted to petition for him to be excused from lessons for that day, and maybe the day following.”

Thoughtfully nodding, the dark-haired wizard in the black robes with the family crest of the Black House done in silver thread, looked out over the chamber. “Looks like they're almost finished with setting up everything. I will inform you, should Harry accept and wish to visit his parents' grave.”

“Good.” Marvolo agreed, taking down the privacy ward to return to his seat, slipping his yew wand back into its holster. He was curious as to how the trial would go.

ooOoo

Cornelius sat on his seat in the Wizengamot chambers, suddenly chilling under his usually much-too-warm plum-coloured robes. He generally liked intense, glowing colours – he loved the lime-green bowler he had gotten as a present some years before – but the fabric these robes were made of was too thick and warm for his taste.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. When his thoughts started to jump around getting stuck on some random, silly thing, he realised he was too nervous and trying to flee from reality. So he dragged his thoughts back on track.

Dolores seemed to have managed to get into a rather tricky situation. If all the evidence Amelia had presented to him just moments ago was correct – and he thought that was rather a given, as she always was really thorough with such things – there was no way he could get her out of it.

They had talked about the lack of discipline at the school, or rather he had agreed with Dolores’ assessment, remembering the fervour Harry Potter had shown in disagreeing with him on the matter of Black and at the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Of course, the boy had been right in retrospect, but he had shown a remarkable lack of respect for adults. And when one student behaved this way, who was to say the others were any better?

But using a blood quill on students in detentions? Dolores clearly had lost some of her quills, no pun intended. The case was solid, so Cornelius expected a rather speedy outcome. Marvolo and his block – most of the conservatives had rallied around him once he had managed to convince them to forgive him for past transgressions – were likely to rule rather harshly, as the woman was a political opponent. And the more liberal among the Lords and Ladies would surely agree with them. They tended to abhor corporal punishment in any form, and had pushed to have it outlawed at schools a few decades earlier. Such a situation – the opposing blocs agreeing on something – didn’t happen too often, but was likely now.

When Amelia Bones took the seat normally occupied by the Chief Warlock, to call for the trial to begin, Cornelius returned his attention to the present, thinking over what the witch might say to get out of a prison sentence, and ways to deflect any damage from himself.

He would have to cut ties with her. There was no other way. She and her influence in certain circles in the Ministry were no longer of any use, and her downfall could only too easily lead to his own,
in the changed political climate. It had been rather startling to watch the lines shift after Lord Slytherin and Lord Black had joined the Wizengamot.

His plan of action decided, Cornelius watched as Amelia called for order.

“Ladies and Lords of the Wizengamot, Dolores Jane Umbridge is here to be tried over the charge of torturing several students.” She waved her wand and the scroll with the information gathered by the Heads of House started to copy itself, the individual duplicates floating to the members of the Wizengamot. “These scrolls contain the gathered evidence, statements from the students and their professors, as well as references to the relevant laws.”

The sound of parchment being unrolled filled the room as all those scrolls were opened to be read.

Cornelius didn’t bother to read the evidence, he was content with the information Amelia had given to him. Dolores now was sitting on the chair in the middle, flanked by two Aurors, her hands primly folded in her lap, back ramrod straight. If he didn’t know her so well, he would not have known how nervous she truly was. Maybe the dark looks from all around the chamber had impacted her confidence.

“As Madame Umbridge insists on a speedy trial, as is her right, we will now hear the evidence presented by the Auror leading the investigation before Madam Umbridge will speak in her own defence, as she has declined her right to call for a solicitor.” Amelia turned to one of the Aurors. “Auror Proudfoot, please begin.”

“Thank you, Madame Bones,” the man said with a little bow before turning his attention to the scowling Lords and Ladies. With an assessing look Cornelius took in the mood and was sure Dolores had as much chance to get out of this as a snowflake faced with Fiendfyre.

“Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, a few weeks ago the four Heads of House of Hogwarts brought the suspicion to us that a member of staff was torturing students during detentions. Madame Pomfrey, Hogwarts’ Medi-witch, provided medical examination results – included in your information – proving that a blood quill was repeatedly used by several students from all four Houses.” More parchment rustling was to be heard.

“As it is painful to write more than a signature with such a quill, it is highly unlikely that the students engaged in this willingly.”

Cornelius watched Dolores’ lips getting thinner, and several of the people seated around the chamber nodding.

“An excerpt from the detention register shows that all students so affected had detention with Dolores Umbridge at least once. There were no students that had a detention with Madame Umbridge that were not affected by the dark implement.” More nodding, while Dolores now watched with narrowed eyes, obviously not agreeing with what Auror Proudfoot was saying.

“Students generally are not able to acquire a blood quill, as they are only allowed at Gringotts and the Ministry for the signing of the most important contracts. As you can see by the names, not one of the students in question has any direct connections to either institution.”

Curious despite the tense situation, Cornelius opened his own scroll, checking the names of the students that had given their testimony. Quickly it was clear what the Auror had been talking about. All the names were ones not common in their community, and there were Muggle guardians named as the reason the respective Head of House had given permission for the testimony and medical exam. Muggle-born and muggle-raised students. Oh, Dolores, why were you doing this?
“One student was found directly after her detention with the marks of repeated blood quill use fresh on her hand, and was immediately treated by the medi-witch.” Proudfoot stood tall, reciting this all from memory, the scroll held loosely in his hand, a picture of confidence. “That Madame Umbridge had attempted to resist being arrested is, in my eyes, further profe for her guilt.”

Then he stood waiting.

Amelia got to her feet again. “Are there further questions for Auror Proudfoot?” she asked of the assembly, all routine and authority.

One witch raised her wand and was recognized to speak by the Head of Magical Law Enforcement. “Who found the one student you spoke of, Auror Proudfoot?”

Before the wizard could answer, Lord Slytherin stood. “My Heir and I found her just outside the Defence classroom, not far from the Defence Professor’s office. She was crying, so I brought her to the infirmary while my son went to fetch Professor Snape.”

A few more unimportant questions were asked, and Cornelius remained in the background.

Then it was time for Dolores to speak.

She stood and attempted to appear larger than she really was. It always had struck Cornelius as odd that she seemed to have a need to be taller. He was just fine being shorter than most of his acquaintances.

“I was appointed to the position of Defence against the Dark Arts Professor, because the current Headmaster was unable to find a new professor in time for the new term to start. The Minister expressed his confidence in my ability to establish a better curriculum in the subject than has been taught in the last decade. He mentioned to me the lack of discipline and respect he had observed in the student population, and I have observed the same, I have set out to help our children learn this extremely important lesson for life. One has to respect those older than we are and those in positions of authority.” She smiled her overly sweet smile, regaining her confidence in the face of the quiet she was met with. Cornelius was sure that she misread the situation, taking the lack of questions and noise as approval rather than the shock it truly was.

“I’m confident that you will agree with me that the most stubborn of children need more encouragement, than manual labour – the most favoured detention, as I have learned from my colleagues – can provide. My method has already achieved great results with the students, achieving respect and discipline in my classes.”

Blinking in shock, Cornelius looked on as Dolores ran head-first into her own doom. He missed the first few questions until one was directed at him. “I did indeed appoint Madame Umbridge,” her eyes widened in shock at his distancing himself from her, “to the position at Hogwarts. And we did speak about a few instances of disrespect I have seen in the last years. But I have never condoned torture as a disciplinary method. I’m appalled that someone I thought I knew would do something so abominable.” Cornelius took care to speak in measured tones, only letting a hint of disappointment and horror show through, as if he were trying to hide those feelings. It looked as if he had managed to cut the ties to Dolores. And her next actions only served his own purpose further.

Dolores jumped up from her chair, face red and contorted in a grimace of rage. “You told me that you trusted my judgement! Told me you were sure my decision on disciplinary methods would be fine! I did this for you, Cornelius! You can’t just toss me to the grindylows!” By the end of her tirade, she was shrieking and had jumped up from her chair, just to be stunned by one of the Aurors
standing by her side.

Embarrassment over the behaviour of the witch settled over the whole chamber, and the decision over whether she was guilty or not was dealt with swiftly and without fanfare. Not one voted in her favour. Even those that agreed with her politically didn’t dare to side with her in the face of her actions.

She was sentenced to ten years in Azkaban and floated out of the room before she was wakened again.

Cornelius was dazed. He had never seen such a speedy trial, not even during the hectic and chaotic time directly after the war with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. But Dolores had asked for it. The Death Eaters had accepted solicitors and most of the time didn’t attempt to defend themselves. And because they had tried to learn as much as possible about over who had done what, and if missing people had died, the trials had sometimes taken days to finish.

Only listening with one ear, while the Auror asked for permission to interrogate some students at Hogwarts with Veritaserum, Cornelius thought about who to send to Hogwarts next. He really wanted someone inside that castle who would help keep him up to date on the happenings. Albus was just too damn secretive. The Minister was compiling a list of possible names, sorting them according to the likelihood they would accept, their trustworthiness, and other factors, as Lord Slytherin suggested some Chinese truth spell as an alternative to Veritaserum, as it would not force answers but would indicate lies.

The decision was made to push the rest of the budgeting session to the next day, prompting all to leave for their homes. Cornelius walked up to his office, ignoring most of the people around him, his mind occupied with his plans to place another professor right under Dumbledore’s nose.

oooOOooo

Sonja watched as Severus walked into the Three Broomsticks, looking around in search of her. The instant he had set foot into the room, she could see that he was tense. He held himself the way he always had in the past when coming to the store to place his orders. The last few times they had met, Severus had been more relaxed, more open. Well, maybe as open as he ever would be in a public place.

But why was he tense now? Sonja had had the impression that everything was going well between them. And the moment his dark eyes fell on her – she had taken great care in selecting the right robes for today – she realized that this was exactly the reason. All was going well, and it might be time to proceed to the next level in their relationship.

Sonja knew that Severus was a very methodical man. Not only in his work with potions, but in all that he did. She smiled at him and watched as he glided over to her table.

She stood to greet him and extended her hand for a greeting, grasping his hesitantly offered hand with the long pale fingers, and pulled him slightly nearer to herself, to lean a bit in his direction and give him a short peck on the cheek. Then she let go of his hand and took a step back, smiling even more brightly. “So nice to see you, Severus. Have you already eaten? Or will you join me in the meal?”
She got the smallest of smiles back as he nodded. “I will join you in a meal, Sonja. I’m glad to escape the endless chattering of so many teenagers for one evening, so I left the castle before dinner was served.”

They started to talk about mundane things – the most ghastly mishap from the potions classroom was exchanged for the most inane question a customer had asked in the apothecary since they had last met – and ordered drinks and something to eat from Rosmerta once she made her way over to them.

They were in the middle of their meal – Sonja had selected an apple crumble, and Severus had ordered a pot roast with potatoes and green beans – when Sonja had had enough of the careful manoeuvring and the occasional stiffness and decided to be blunt, and most un-Slytherin. But this, their relationship, needed a little push to get it moving forward.

She placed her hand on the arm of her companion, feeling him flinch. “Severus, please, what has you so tense? Talk to me.” She spoke with gentle force, almost demanding that he answer her.

She could almost see him gathering his resolve, taking a deep calming breath, before he started to explain, his gaze directed on the bottle of red wine they were sharing. “I’m happy with the way our… relationship is developing. But before we go any further, you might want to know more about… my past.” Severus trailed off and took a sip of his wine.

Sonja was relieved. They hadn’t spoken about this up until now, but she knew some things about her wizard’s past.

She smiled reassuringly and started to speak before Severus could continue. “Are you talking about your work for Albus Dumbledore at the end of the last war?” she asked pointedly, getting a startled look from Severus, which she answered with another smile.

“‘You know?’” he all but whispered.

She shook her head. “I wouldn’t claim to know everything. But I know some of it. I know all that is a matter of public record. Once father realized that this between us was more than a casual fling, he made sure to get information to either prove or disprove all the rumours which are surrounding you. And he shared what he found with me.”

Severus nodded slowly, probably rearranging the facts in his head. “And you have no problem with the fact that I was part of that organisation, even if I was spying on them?”

“Well… I like you the way you are now. What you did as a young man is not what I would deem most important. But I’m curious. Father told me that you’re still in contact with Lord Slytherin. Many of his orders to the apothecary insist on the same sources and quality markers as yours do.”

That clever deduction of association out of the orders for potions ingredients brought a smirk to Severus’ face. He got his wand out and cast what Sonja guessed – she had seen the wand movements often enough – was a privacy ward of some kind.

“You're right. I brew potions for Lord Slytherin. After he regained a body he contacted me, as he was in need of a reliable Potions Master. You see, the wizard responsible for brewing the potion used in the ritual managed to bungle it just enough. It is most curious. He made so many errors that the body created was at most humanoid. But not so many that it failed completely. It was a challenge I could not decline.”

Sonja listened attentively to every word Severus said, smiling delightedly at the gleam in his dark
eyes as he spoke about the challenge to give a new – human – body to Lord Slytherin. She was curious about the composition of the potion Severus had brewed, but refrained from asking, because they had more important matters to discuss.

“But I digress. Since then, I brew all the medicinal potions he or his son need.”

Sonja narrowed her eyes. That was not all of it. She had seen the orders, had assembled most of them herself. The amount that had been bought and the ingredients themselves didn’t match up with those needed in medicinal potions for two persons.

Severus smiled. “You’ve caught me. You always look beyond the obvious. So few wizards and witches do this.” He took her hand in his and squeezed it gently.

A little chagrinned that her face must have shown her scepticism, Sonja explained why she didn’t believe that this was all there was to it. “I know potions, Severus. I might not be able to study for a Mastery, as I can’t wield magic. But I know my theory!” It always felt good when he acknowledged her competence in the field of potions. All of their customers who had learned of her status always assumed that she was working in the apothecary because she was good in bookkeeping.

“He set me a research project. And I had another idea while working on it. He funds my research,” Severus said and that gleam entered his eyes again.

“So the rumours are correct? He was cursed and regained his sanity when he lost his body?” It was such an unlikely tale that most of her acquaintances and the customers agreed that no one would invent a story like this, so it had to be true. She was on the fence about it, maybe Severus would know.

Picking his fork and knife back up, Severus contemplated her question. While she waited for him to answer, Sonja resumed eating as well. It would be such a waste to not eat every little crumb of her excellent apple crumble.

“It is a fact that Lord Slytherin is not behaving the same way as the Dark Lord did before his… fall.” Severus spoke haltingly, in a soft voice, as if he was weighing every word before he spoke it. “He resembles the wizard the older… members… talked about. An intelligent, charming, and manipulative politician.”

“And his political goals? At the moment, he seems to be working towards an overhaul of the whole Werewolf legislation. Most history texts focus on the extremism surrounding the beliefs of pure blood, and I doubt that’s all there is to it.” Waving her fork around, Sonja leaned forward, her gaze fixed on the wizard sitting at the other side of the table.

“Judging by the research he asked me to do… He is concerned over the demographic development of the magical community in Britain.”

Silence fell between them as Sonja reviewed the ingredients that had been ordered, trying to deduct what kind of potions Severus was working on that he could come up with such an idea. Her eyes got wide in surprise when she realized what the list pointed at. Pomegranate seeds, Alchemilla arvensis, monks pepper… “You are researching fertility potions?”

Severus chuckled – not something that she had heard often so far – and nodded. “In a way. The first potion is already in the final testing stage. It is one that Salazar Slytherin started to create. I think he was hindered by his lack of knowledge about human procreation, the female fertility cycle…” he blushed, or at least Sonja believed he did, before he regained his composure and
continued as if nothing had happened. “Its intent is to allow two wizards to have a child with the help of a surrogate mother. And I have started to work on a potion to determine the likelihood of two partners’ having healthy, as well as magical, children together. I hope it will help convince the most ardent believers of blood purity to reconsider their views.”

He had spoken with quiet fervour and now was looking at his plate, spearing the green beans one by one on his fork.

Why would he be so… downcast, or maybe disheartened, when it was obvious that he loved his work? Or maybe the potions research was not the source of his mood. Maybe it was something different, but related.

Taking another bite from her sweet evening meal, Sonja let her mind wander, jumping from thought to thought, from idea to idea. What could make Severus hesitate that was connected with potions designed to test if a couple would have an easy time having children, or giving two men a child? Could it be? Was it possible that Severus wanted to ask her, if she would be willing to have children with him?

But, no! That was ridiculous. Yes, they were remarkably compatible in their scientific interest in potions, they enjoyed the same books, plays, and music. They had the same kind of humour. But marriage and children were still far off. Many steps away. First they should progress to the next step, and not jump several steps ahead.

She looked at the situation and all the facts she had from different angles, but the conclusion was always the same. Severus wanted to know if she would start a family with him. There was no way he would ask now, or even think about asking, if he didn’t have a really good reason.

“Why do you feel that you have to ask me, now?” Sonja asked finally, seemingly coming up with the question at random. Someone not privy to her thoughts would have difficulty to understanding the way she had reached this point.

Severus looked up from his mostly empty plate, the soft light making him look less pale, and pinched the bridge of his nose. As he began to speak, Sonja was sure that he had had no problem following her line of thought. “There are several reasons. The most important is that I’m under a time constraint.” He folded his hands on the table, intently looking at her. “Do you know the first name of the organisation we spoke about? What it was named in the beginning?”

Furrowing her brow in thought, Sonja tried to remember this particular detail from all the disjointed pieces of information her father had come home with. “Something along the lines of Wall… no, I don’t remember.”

“Knights of Walpurgis. I guess… that there is some meaning to the knights part of that name.” Dark eyes captured hers as Severus waited for her to make the right connection, to understand what he was not quite saying. He meandered around the point he clearly wanted to make as if he were under an oath not to speak of it. An oath… and he had said that knights were of some significance. She tangled her fingers with Severus’ seeking closeness while she thought about the trail of breadcrumbs he had laid out for her to follow.

As a young girl Sonja had listened with great interest to her mother telling her stories of the long-ago days of Merlin and Avalon. These stories had been rich with incredible magical feats, chivalry, battles against evil, and knights. Knights that had sworn an oath to serve their King, or Lord… “You’re a vassal?” It would make sense, but the implications… it was staggering.

“I’m not really sure. The magic of the mark is unique, or at least unknown to me… but I was
reminded of some of the old stories. If that was because it was meant to result in a similar connection, or only for the effect… But there still is a connection. And he is concerned over the number of children born, the small families, the shrinking population as a result of the war he waged in the past. He is encouraging everyone either to start a family, or to expand already-existing ones.” Severus trailed off, caressing Sonja’s hands with soft touches.

A little bemused by the fact that Severus seemed unable to actually speak the words, actually ask her if she wanted a family and children, if she would marry him if he would ask, Sonja looked at their intertwined hands. But by all accounts, all the gossip she had heard while standing behind the counter at the Apothecary, commissioning orders, accepting payments, Severus was not someone to express positive emotions or have any form of interaction beyond polite disregard. Fear of being rejected would not allow him to ask outright.

So Sonja weighted what she wanted in her life and what Severus was asking, to come to a conclusion, trying to leave her feelings out of it for the moment. Their love was a tender plant at the moment, not at all guaranteed to grow. But if everything else worked out, marriages of convenience were not the worst possible fate.

She had always wanted to go into potions research until it was clear beyond doubt that she was a Squib and never would get her Potions Mastery. Getting the knowledge to run the Apothecary once her father was too old had been second best. Severus was a renowned – if infamous for his temper and his past – Potions Master, who liked to discuss potions theory and his ideas with her. She would come nearer to her dream, married to him, than she ever had thought possible. That was one point for a marriage to Severus.

Growing up in the wizarding world, Sonja had come to love many of its aspects. Her time at a muggle school and university had not changed that fact. Staying around magic was what she would not give up even if it would cost her life. She had always known that there was the possibility that she would have to live as a whore in Knockturn Alley when her father died. Shops solely operated by Squibs never made it for long before they had to sell and move on. If Severus was her husband, she could stay on and run the Apothecary with him as the nominal owner. Another point in favour of a marriage.

It was obvious that Severus wanted children – if only because he had been ordered to, or because he had always wanted a family was of no real consequence – as did she. Never hoping to find a wizard, and not really willing to drag a muggle into her world, Sonja had been resigned to her fate. Once or twice she had met with another Squib, starting to hope, but every time those men hadn’t been able to stomach the prejudice and pity, leaving soon after for the muggle world. With Severus she would have the children she wished for, they would grow up in the world she loved – despite the bad points – and possibly would even be able to do magic. Another point in favour.

She gently smiled up to Severus, who had gotten more worried by the minute while she thought. He gave her a shaky smile back and waited for her to finish her searching for an answer.

She was not blind to the negatives. If she married Severus, she would be married to an ex-Death Eater – or a Death Eater in the eyes of all those that thought there was no such thing as an ex-Death Eater – and all-around unpleasant man. There would be those pitying Severus for a Squib wife, those that would think she was not good enough for him because a Squib was an embarrassment to be cast out and forgotten. There would be those complimenting Severus for taking her in, caring for her, as if she were an invalid dependent on the care of someone else. With a wry smile she thought the latter would probably be the worst. But she heard those opinions all the time. Married to Severus, she would have a shield and maybe could prove to all those belittling her that they were wrong. Society's view on the matter was not exactly a point against marrying.
The fact that Severus was still tied to the man now known as Lord Slytherin was the biggest issue. Severus had not really said outright that the man still was a dark wizard, but neither had he denied it. It was possible that he still was unsure about him and what he would do. He had called him a manipulative politician. Those were known to do many things to get what they wanted passed into law. Some killed, blackmailed, or took bribes. Sonja was sure that many of the Ministry officials did the same – maybe not the killing part – even the Muggles operated on that level. Would she have to associate with Lord Slytherin often? Probably not, and certainly not in a way that sworn vassals were required...

In the end, her – their – daily lives would not be impacted overly much, she decided, looking back up to Severus smiling mischievously. “I expect that you will ask Father, as is proper, and I want a nice ring.”

His owlish blink made her chuckle, and suddenly they both were standing and he held her in an embrace. “I promise you that you will never regret this, Sonja.”

ooOoo

Severus was in a daze on his way back to the castle. He was engaged. She had said yes to the question which he had not really asked.

He had never thought she would, had been bracing himself for her rejection. Waiting for her to think things through had been torture. And her final answer had catapulted him right into heaven. It was ridiculous how things like marriage could make a mess of his emotions.

He was contemplating if he should tell his Lord or ask Sonja’s father for her hand first, when he stepped into the deserted entrance hall. It was long past curfew, and all the students and professors were in their rooms.

Turning to make his way down to the dungeons, Severus spotted the Headmaster walking down the steps, clearly on his way to speak to him.

“Headmaster,” Severus greeted with a small nod, only slowing his steps a little, but continuing on his way to his quarters.

“Good evening, Severus. You are back late, my boy.” Severus rolled his eyes inwardly over this combined reprimand-enquiry the old man made with these few words.

“I have been in Hogsmeade meeting up with a friend. Aurora was aware of my absence, and the prefects have been informed as well. I was not aware that there was a curfew for professors, Headmaster.”

The old man inclined his head, conceding the point. “Actually, I wanted to ask you what you know of the sightings on the continent. And if you could fill in for our missing Professor.”

Sighing, Severus led the way down to his sitting room to relay what information he had been told to pass on. Not really being a double spy was much easier than he would have thought.

Chapter End Notes
That scene with Severus and Sonja got way longer than I had thought it would :D I had planned something else, but Sonja sure is one pragmatic woman. And it all took on a life of its own.
I hope the trial for Umbridge was not too short. But I wanted to show a little bit of Fudge’s view on the world, which restricted the view a little, hopefully it worked out, tell me what you think about that scene! (and the one with Severus and Sonja, I’m really interested in feedback to both scenes!)

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published on the 10th of February 2017
On the morning of Thursday – the sixth of October – the news about the speedy trial and the ten-year sentence was the talk at all four house tables. The news had made it into the school through rumours and letters from family the evening before. They all speculated who would be the new professor, when the person would arrive, and who would fill in, in the meantime.

Harry felt better about the whole debacle, now that Umbridge was gone, in prison for torturing children. No longer would he need to constantly withstand her baiting him, and he would hopefully actually learn something in the class. And like all the others, he was eager to get his Daily Prophet – Marvolo had been paying for a subscription for Harry since the beginning of October – to read what the newspaper had to report on the proceedings. One glance at the unusually thick bundle the owl brought him, and Harry was sure that there was more than one simple article about Umbridge inside.

Hermione, on the other side of the table, spread out her copy with hasty movements, and Ron just managed to get a platter of sausages out of the way before a picture of Minister Fudge could tip into it. “Look!” his female friend called out. “The Minister gave a press conference this morning. He has already found a new professor…” Hermione trailed off and her face fell.

Harry had just counted the pages, seeing that all of the first six pages were dedicated to the Umbridge Fiasco, as Skeeter had named it in the main article right there on the front page.

“What’s the matter, Hermione?” it was easier to ask her than to read all the articles himself. Even with how much he had improved in his study habits, she was still much faster when reading then he ever would be.

“See who Minister Fudge has appointed to the position,” she turned the paper as fast as she was able – tipping one jug of milk over, almost showering Seamus with the contents. He just managed to catch the jug at the last moment – pointing at a smaller article on the third page. “Wilbert Slinkhard!” She was obviously very unhappy with that choice.

Ron and Harry exchanged a bewildered gaze, not following their friend.

“Oh, you two! Remember that useless textbook Umbridge forced at us? Wilbert Slinkhard is the author! With him as our teacher, we’ll have no chance to be better prepared for our OWLs than with Umbridge!” She was clearly exasperated that Ron and Harry needed so long to catch up, and over the fact the author of the book she – or rather all of them – had complained about at every opportunity, would be their teacher.

With a groan Ron smacked his hand against his forehead. “I would rather have Snape.”

Scanning the headlines, Harry snorted, and looked up with a slightly mocking expression. “And who was the red-head, looking a lot like you, complaining about having Professor Snape for defence again this morning in the common room?”

Ron stuck out his tongue at his two friends, and they all laughed, breaking the tension a little. Harry folded the newspaper so he could eat and read at the same time. “Let’s see how the man is as a teacher before we despair. At least Umbridge is gone.” He tried to sound confident, but the
man that had written that book… how could he possibly be a competent teacher?

While Harry ate his porridge with cinnamon and apple pieces, he read the different articles reporting on Umbridge, her childhood, earlier career, and the laws she had worked on in the last years. One article about her career had a comment from the Minister that brought out a snort from Harry. The man said he never would have thought that his dear friend Dolores would misconstrue his words about discipline at Hogwarts in such a way. After the training of the past summer, he would spot an attempt to put distance between oneself and a liability ten miles against the wind. Fudge still was the shifty politician Harry had met the summer after second year, trying to cover up the fact that Harry had run away from home, garnering goodwill with the public because there had been a breakout at Azkaban.

Next he refilled his goblet of juice and turned to the summarization of the short trial held the previous day. Skeeter put a lot of emphasis on the fact that Lord Slytherin had found out about the torture during detention and informed the teachers, as well as the fact that the man had spoken up at the trial, speeding things along nicely.

Once more Harry felt conflicted. That Marvolo had taken action – had done exactly as he said he would – was more than Harry had seen in many adults as far back as he could remember. The Dursleys surely never did anything one could remotely be proud of. Harry felt proud about his parents whenever Sirius told him one of his many stories about their time at school together. And now he felt something coming rather close to that feeling. He felt proud of what Marvolo had done to get Umbridge into prison.

Could he feel proud of the man who had killed so many? Had done so much evil? Even now was harbouring escaped prisoners? Maybe he could be proud about the fact that Marvolo had done something good. Again. If he counted supporting a school/home for magical children to get them away from bad living conditions.

And as far as helping escaped convicts… he was not the one to throw stones. After all, he had helped Sirius escape, but he had to concede that his godfather had been innocent.

Shaking his head, Harry decided that this was not the time to ponder over whether he had the right to feel proud of something his guardian had done, and turned back to the lively discussion happening around him. Ignoring McLaggen snogging a few seats down with a girl from his year. Really, that they could not manage to spare them all from such displays.

“Oh, look!” Parvati exclaimed, pointing towards the doors to the Great Hall, where an old wizard – judging by the white hair, gathered in some kind of ponytail – strode into the room.

“Seems like we will not be the first class to have a lesson with the new professor,” Hermione remarked to the other fifth-years while they watched the wizard walk up to the head table.

The rest of their time until they had to depart for their first class was spent trying to figure out which class would be the first having their new professor, and tasking the students with reporting on the man’s teaching style this evening, at the latest, in the common room.

“Do you think we will have to hand in that last essay Umbridge gave us to write?” Ron asked as they all stood to go to their lesson, startling a few laughs out of the other Gryffindors, and sparking a discussion of why waiting for the last moment to start homework was better than doing it right away. Hermione just could not get behind the argument, “The work would have been in vain, now that Umbridge is gone,” insisting that their teachers didn’t go missing that often that it would be a reasonable approach.
Severus watched as the door to the Great Hall opened the second day in a row in the middle of the morning meal. He had only cast a glance at the paper, deciding to read it later and not ruin his breakfast with the drivel Miss Skeeter regularly wrote. That was the reason he, unlike most others, was not concentrating on the newspaper, looking out over the hall instead and spotting the old wizard as one of the first.

So this was – most likely – the new Defence against the Dark Arts Professor. His Lord probably would like to know as much as possible about the man now about to teach Mr. Slytherin. Especially after the last professor had tortured students during detentions.

Severus watched – sipping from his honey-sweetened coffee – as the man made his way up to them and was met by the Headmaster, who quickly conjured an additional chair for the wizard to sit on. “Mr. Wilbert Slinkhard I presume?” The unremarkable wizard nodded and took a seat, looking up and down the table, checking out the food, with a small smile.

“That is correct, Headmaster. I guess Cornelius did inform you that he asked me if I would like to teach at Hogwarts?” Slinkhard had a mild voice, as unremarkable as the man himself. Severus was a little unnerved by the overly mild man.

Albus shook his head, his eyes twinkling as usual. “He has not. I guess he had no time. When can you begin?”

“Teaching? Today. I will have to see about lesson plans over the weekend. But I can teach a class any moment.” He shrugged, and the Headmaster nodded solemnly.

“I’m sure Argus will show you the way around. Until then,” he waved his arm towards the table, indicating all the breakfast foods still waiting to be eaten, “join in on our breakfast.”

“A most generous offer, Headmaster. But I fear that I will have to decline. International portkeys never have agreed with my stomach. A cup of tea is all I would like at the moment.” Severus was not so sure how the dynamics between the staff members would change with their new addition, but that they would change was clear. Every Defence Professor had brought change to Hogwarts. The worst had been Lockhart, but Umbridge had been a close second. Maybe the fake Moody could be placed on the same level, but now that he knew the man had been Bartemius Jr. all along, his view had changed, tinted by respect for the acting skills Bartemius had used to pass as the old ex-Auror for an entire school year.

He was curious how this one would play out.

Late in the afternoon Harry walked into the library to meet with Luna and Theo to study for the test they would have in Runes the next week. All day the rumours about the new Defence Professor had been running wild in the school. But the few Gryffindors who had lessons in Defence today had not been able to tell them much.
The NEWT students had been allowed to ask questions about the tests they would take at the end of the year, after Professor Slinkhard had learned that they knew next to nothing from their previous teacher.

The third-years could tell them that the professor had been astonished to see a book he had written as an introduction for children – below the age of eleven – used as the only class text for students far older. After that, he had them write him a list of all magical creatures they knew and what they knew about them.

All in all, those snippets of information gave reason to hope that Professor Slinkhard would not focus only on theory as Umbridge had done, but they were no guarantee they would get to use their wands.

Hermione had remarked that the Slytherin/Ravenclaw first-year class had been today as well, prompting Ron into sending Harry off with the order to gather intelligence from his study partners.

Luna was already sitting at their usual table, gazing into the air, a dreamy expression on her face. Theo was sitting beside her, writing on a long piece of parchment.

With a silent greeting – Madame Pince never hesitated over throwing out those that made any loud noises – Harry slipped into his seat, getting his notes and textbook out of his satchel.

“Did you get the last translation back already?” Theo wanted to know in a near whisper.

“Yeah,” Harry answered, setting his inkwell next to his right hand. “I got full marks. Thanks again for the help.”

“No problem, Henry. I’m happy to help.” The lanky Slytherin smiled and returned his attention to the letter he was writing.

They worked in silence for quite some time – Harry repeating his newest runes to get used to writing them – before Harry tried to ask nonchalantly what he wanted to know the most at the moment. “What have the firsties said about the new professor? I’m curious if he’s any better than the toad.”

Theo shrugged. “They weren’t really impressed. Said that they did nothing practical, so most of them think he’s no better than Umbridge.”

Luna pinned her hair back with her wand, shaking her head slightly from side to side. “Our first-years loved the lesson. They had a long discussion about reasons causing violence between people and what fear of the unknown has to do with it. Most up in the tower are eager to speak with Professor Slinkhard. I wonder if he ever saw a Blibbering Humdinger. He seems like a person that would attract them.”

“So, probably more theory, but hopefully less demeaning from the new Professor?” Harry summarized with a dejected voice.

Theo nodded, equally unhappy. “Seems likely. I have read the book he wrote. If he believes that’s an adequate introduction, I don’t think he’ll let us cast any spells at one another. Maybe we can get him to let us cast at dummies, so we get to train at least a little bit for the OWLs.”

Sighing sadly, Harry picked up his quill. “We can only hope.” But it didn’t sound like it would get much better lesson wise. It was good that Umbridge was gone – Slinkhard probably was not the type to torture students during detention – but it would have been much better if someone like Remus could have come and teach them.
As the last one in the Apothecary on this Friday evening, Sonja started with the routine of closing. Sweeping the floor, placing small jars and bottles back in their proper places, collecting small change and lost objects from all around. It was soothing, and Sonja always started on it before she really closed the doors.

The bell above the door sounded, announcing that a late customer had just set foot into her domain. Picking up one bottle of mouse blood that someone had placed among the bottles of armadillo bile, Sonja made her way to the counter.

As she rounded the corner of one of the shelves filled with barks of different kinds, the shelve with the ready-made potions they had on offer came into view. An elderly Lady in old-fashioned muggle clothing covered by a mauve-coloured robe, stood by the shelf looking as if she was searching for something.

The grin Sonja was sporting since the evening of her engagement got wider as she walked over to the woman she knew well.

“Mrs. Figg, how may I help you?”

“Yes, dear,” the older woman said, turning with a kind smile to face the other Squib. “You look great, girl! How are you?”

“I’m happy, Mrs. Figg. How is the kneazle breeding going?” Small talk was a necessity as a shop owner. Show that you care about the people, but don’t speak about anything that might be of any importance. Sonja always loved it when one of the regulars came in who preferred a more direct and businesslike interaction. Severus had always been one of those.

“Same old, same old. Mr. Tibbles is a little overly nervous at the moment. So I want to give him some calming draught. The Magical Menagerie charges double for a phial, but if I get one from you and water it down it will last three times longer for half the money!”

The old Squib always got worked up over these things, and could rant about supposed swindlers for hours. So Sonja took one phial of calming draught out of the neat row and walked over to the counter, followed by the still-chatting, slightly batty looking woman.

“You look unusually happy, dear Miss Jiggers. Have you found yourself a beau at last?” A gleam had entered the old eyes. A gleam Sonja had learned to fear as it usually was the harbinger of attempts to hook her up with someone, always ending in awkward dates.

“Indeed I have,” Sonja said to derail the imminent matchmaking, and because she was bursting to share her news with the world. It just made her so happy that she would have Severus in her life.

“Oh! Do tell, who is he? A Squib I know? Or a Muggle?” It was a testament to the state of their world, that Mrs. Figg automatically assumed she had found a man not able to wield magic. That a wizard would not be interested. And that Sonja first had thought just a man without magic made just too clear how deep those prejudices truly were embedded in all of them.

“He’s a wizard. I have met him in the Apothecary many times.” Sonja still smiled, but braced herself for the reaction she would get from almost anyone, while she wrapped the phial in paper
spelled to cushion the contents.

“A wizard?” Mrs. Figg’s tone was sceptical. “Be careful, dear. A wizard will take advantage of you if you let him!” she waved her finger in warning, and accepted her purchase.

“No need to worry, Mrs. Figg. He is an honourable man. Have a nice weekend.”

It was obvious that Sonja’s words had not convinced the old Squib, but Sonja was content in her knowledge that Severus Snape was a deeply honourable man. A man she was going to spend her life with.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Sonja closed the door, turned the key, and left for the backrooms to take the tally and lock the earnings of the day away.

ooOoo

In the evening, after the classes and the last detention had been dealt with – Severus had caught the infernal Weasley twins brewing in an empty classroom and consequently had put them in detention for it – the Potions Master informed the Headmaster per Floo that he would be out of the castle this evening for some social calls. This was their code for Severus being out on Death Eater activities. Usually these days, those activities were actually social calls. Rather ironic in Severus’ mind, as the Headmaster had said it would be a good way to cover for the unpleasant meetings and raids Severus probably had to attend after he resumed spying.

Quickly exchanging his sturdy teaching robes for finer, more comfortable ones, Severus picked up the small case containing the potion he had brewed earlier for Narcissa. As he wanted to speak with Lucius tonight, he might as well deliver the potion the man had requested from him.

Waving his hand to get his cloak to float over to him, Severus stalked from his rooms, through the corridors of the school – students hurrying to make way for him – out of the castle, and over the grounds towards the gates to the road to the village. He’d rather Apparate as it would muddy the waters if the Headmaster did try to trace his travels.

After turning on his heel, Severus appeared in front of the entrance gate to Malfoy Manor. The wards were rather harsh, and someone not related to the family – or especially keyed into them, like the Dark Lord – could not apparate directly into the grounds. For big events, guests arrived by Floo to a special room only open on those days. But today was a rather ordinary Friday evening in early October – the weather getting rather wet and unpleasant – so Severus had to walk the long trek up to the front door.

At least he would not have to wait for one of the elves to open the gates, as there was a small allowance in the wards for people wearing the Dark Lord’s mark. As far as Severus knew, Abraxas Malfoy had added those modifications, and Lucius had never figured out how to remove this hole in the defence without breaking the whole ward structure.

Now it came in rather handy, but back then Lucius had cussed up a storm about that problem and the fact he was unable to call in an expert for help.

During his musings Severus had made it up to the house and was led in by one of the house-elves. He ignored the little being’s ramblings – their abhorrent grammar was something Severus could not really stand, and he felt as if the elves spoke deliberately worse than usual when he was around
– but followed it to one of the more familiar and cosy sitting rooms, which the family used when not entertaining guests.

“Severus!” Narcissa greeted him from her place curled up on one of the loveseats, a book in her hand, a cup of tea – ginger, by the scent in the air – near at hand. “So nice of you to come by.” Suddenly her expression became concerned. “There’s nothing wrong with Draco, is there?”

“No need to worry, Narcissa,” Severus reassured her, getting the small case of phials out of his deep cloak pocket. “I wanted to speak with Lucius and thought I could deliver your order at the same time.”

With a large smile, Narcissa set down her book on a small side table, getting up to meet Severus halfway into the room. “You are a lifesaver, Severus. It will be so much better with the right potion to soothe my stomach. Thank you!” She took the case from Severus and, with a small smile and some murmured excuses, vanished from the room.

A heartfelt, “Thank you,” from Lucius, after the man’s wife was safely out of earshot, made Severus chuckle.

“Just you wait, Severus. Once you start really fulfilling our Lord’s orders, you will come to appreciate your skills in potion making even more than you do now.” He waved a finger at Severus, who still was smirking, and walked over to a liquor cabinet next to a low bookshelf.

While Lucius poured them both a drink, Severus handed his cloak to the elf patiently waiting by the door, before he selected one of the armchairs to sit in.

“What did you want to talk about, Severus? It is not often that you come out here during the school year.” Lucius handed Severus his drink – a nice amber-coloured old whiskey – and took a seat in an armchair across from his friend.

Stalling for time by taking a sip from his glass, Severus thought about the best way to approach this topic. He had thought on and off about it since the Headmaster had let him leave after the impromptu meeting after his date with Sonja. And he had no idea how to avoid the teasing he was sure the other would inflict upon him once he learned what Severus wanted to ask. But there simply was no one the Potions Master would entrust with this secret – maybe beside the Dark Lord himself – with any sense of fashion.

Well, there was nothing for it, and waiting would only increase the teasing once he had asked. “I wanted to get your advice,” Severus said as calmly as he could manage, using his skill with Occlumency to keep his cool demeanour.

“Advice about what?” the blond wizard asked, sipping at his own glass, relaxing into his seat. He was the picture of leisure, and Severus didn’t buy it at all. Lucius was too consummate a Slytherin not to see the opportunity for what it was. Someone asking for advice, even a friend, always offered possible blackmail material, knowledge, and generally a way to establish a dominant position in any relationship.

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“About where to buy a ring of quality. Price is not a primary concern, but some variety to choose from would be good.” While musing over the custom of bonding rings and wedding bands, Severus had come to the conclusion that he didn’t want to go for the most expensive or most economical choice, but would rather search for a ring complementing Sonja than one to impress society.

A pale brow rose at that proclamation. “For a man or a woman?”
“A woman, Lucius, don’t play daft.” Today was not a day Severus was up to fencing with words for more than a few moments.

Now it was the blond Lord’s turn to chuckle. “Don’t get your robes caught on a branch, Severus. I will not tease you… overly much.” A smirk appeared on Lucius’ face. “Even if you probably never expected that it would get to happen, I have many jabs to repay to you, my friend. And I fully intend to balance those debts.”

With a groan, Severus let his head fall forward, his dark hair shielding his face from view, getting Lucius to laugh out loud. Of course he knew what debt Lucius was speaking of. When Narcissa had been pregnant with Draco, Lucius had often suffered from her moods, offering a convenient target for teasing and snide remarks.

“Do I know the bride-to-be?” Lucius wanted to know, a dangerous glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

“Maybe,” was Severus’ only answer. He would not volunteer any information.

Lucius chuckled again. “Severus, please, there is no reason to be so reluctant. Your talent with potions will help me stay sane in the next months.”

“You don’t enter apothecaries often, so I don’t think you would have met her,” the dark-haired wizard said, and relaxed into his chair.

“So she is a Potions Mistress? I have to confess I never paid much attention to those working in your field. But I can’t see you with a witch not interested in potions.” The host was slipping in a more relaxed pose himself and looked up slightly bewildered when Severus tensed again.

“I’m sorry,” Severus said, standing and leaving his glass almost untouched on a side table. “But it seems our Lord requires my presence.”

Lucius stood as well. “I will send you my recommendation via owl. It still isn’t a good idea to make him wait.”

Both wizards said short words of farewell before Severus made his way out of the big Manor and apparated to the place his Mark called him to.

ooOoo

In one of the workrooms in the Death Eater Headquarters Marvolo stepped back from one of three bathtubs filled with a gruesome mixture. The blood, bones, and flesh from several pigs had been mixed with different magical herbs, as well as parts from various animals. Surrounded by rune circles and activated with drops of blood from those he wanted to replace, new bodies started to form.

There were not many ways to make the world believe his followers had been killed – without actually killing them – but if no bodies were found at all, all of them would be much less effective. So he had dug up one old ritual he had once contemplated for creating a new body for himself, should he ever lose his. Once he had realized that the body thus created could never hold a soul, was only useable for fooling identifying spells, potions, and such, and could not even able to be animated to do menial work, Marvolo had thrown out the idea of using it himself.
He never had contemplated – for long – why someone would create a body good for nothing besides looking like someone specific and lying around. But now it came in handy, because once the bodies had undergone whatever damage supposedly had killed the Death Eater in question, each of them would make a convincing corpse.

After washing his hands in fresh, hot water, with generous amounts of mildly scented soap, Marvolo stepped over into his potions laboratory and up to the snake ornament placed on the desk that was standing in one corner of the room.

A short tap with his wand to the head of the rearing cobra, and the call for Severus was finished.

While the Dark Lord waited for his Potions Master to arrive, Marvolo started to set up all he needed to brew some more pain potions. His attempts to reabsorb the diadem horcrux through the method mentioned most often – through true remorse for the death that had been used in its creation – were not going well. In consequence he often suffered from stabbing headaches. Causing him to be going through pain potions at a rather high rate.

He just had started chopping the chamomile when the door opened to admit Severus, who took two steps into the room, before going down on his knees, robes pooling around him, for a proper greeting.

Without pausing, Marvolo addressed Severus. He didn’t intend to keep the man long. “Rise, Severus. I wanted to know how the Polyjuice potion is coming along. And there is a new list with medical potions Healer Greengrass needs you to brew.”

Severus took the one step towards the desk where the list rested on a stack of books, picked it up and scanned it quickly. Marvolo noticed the quick glance the Potions Master gave to the potion he currently was working on. Inwardly smirking, Marvolo wondered what Severus was thinking about his foray into the other’s domain.

“If you require headache-relieving potions, my Lord, I’m more than willing to brew them for you.” The dark eyes were as cautious as the voice, clearly expecting some repercussions for questioning the actions of the Dark Lord.

A small smile was quickly banished from Marvolo’s face, and he reduced the heat under the cauldron. “I’m aware of that. But I use this to relax, not only for the end product.” He probably would have used this batch up by next week, if his headaches stayed this consistent, but that was another matter completely. “So, Polyjuice?”

“The Polyjuice potion will be finished on schedule, my Lord.” Severus sounded like he wanted to say something else, but Marvolo was not really interested enough to ask. The self-proclaimed Dark Lord paused. That was new. Most of the time he either didn’t notice when there was something a person wanted to say or ask – because he didn’t pick up on the subtle signs – or he disregarded their uneasiness as unimportant, assuming he already knew what they thought, which – he hoped – had been the case more often. In the past these situations would have been moments he would use Legilimency without much thought.

Blinking slowly, Marvolo realized that he had not used this special skill since he had forced Severus to lower all his walls. How… odd.

Rolling his eyes, Marvolo started stirring as was required by the instructions he had memorized so many years ago. “Don’t fret, Severus. Malcolm is monitoring my use of potions against pain quite closely. I don’t need two mother hens running after me.”
Waving away Severus’ attempt at an apology, he changed the topic. “Tell me what the rules are for absences from classes for family business. I want to give Henry some time away from his classmates on the day of his parents’ death. And I’d rather be prepared in case the Headmaster tries to prevent it. Or has he offered as much to Henry in the past?”

“Not that I’m aware of, my Lord. The boy has attended the feast and lessons on that day in the past years.”

The rest of the time needed to complete the headache-relief potion was spent talking about the minutiae of Hogwarts’ bureaucracy. When it was possible to ask for time off from classes. What was needed to get permission to leave school grounds with someone other than the legal guardian. And other such things Marvolo had never thought about before.

oooOo0oo

Jean was excited. While she checked her clothes once more in the bedroom mirror, she was giddy with anticipation. She always was in such a mood when they accompanied their daughter Hermione to the magical street in London to get her school supplies.

Since they had learned that Fabian’s uncle was a wizard of some considerable wealth, they had developed much closer ties to the magical world, stopping a rift from widening further. She was really happy about that. Ever since Hermione had left for the first time for Hogwarts they had drifted apart. And she really had not been happy about that.

Today Xerxes wanted to show her and Fabian the school he had founded in remembrance of his late sister. The wizard would come by in a few minutes, a quick glance at the clock confirmed, to take them to the school by something called a portkey.

“Are you finished, darling?” Fabian called up from the ground floor, sounding as eager to start their excursion as Jean felt.

“Coming!” It was ridiculous really, like she was a little girl on her way to an amusement park.

Her hurry to get down the stairs brought a broad grin to her husband’s face and she huffed in amusement. “Don’t say you’re not excited as well!”

His laugh was cut short by the doorbell sounding, announcing the arrival of someone at their door.

Fabian opened the door and revealed Xerxes Lestrange standing on the other side a bright smile making him seem much younger. “Jean, Fabian, good day to you both! It’s a really fine day, and I’m happy to show you the school before the term starts on Monday. I’m curious what you will think.” He seemed to wear normal enough clothes, but Jean had seen him in traditional wizarding wear a few times by now.

He had been by to lay wards around their house when some criminals – including his own sons – had escaped from the wizarding prison. He assured them that it was unlikely they would be targeted, but better safe than sorry.

Xerxes stepped into the hall while Fabian closed the door behind the wizard. Getting a small coil of thin cord from his pocket, Xerxes smiled at them both. “This is the portkey we will be using. It’s quite easy. We’ll all touch it at the same time. Then I will speak the activation word, triggering the
magic that will move us to our destination. The sensation is something one needs to get used to. I have heard it compared to whirlwinds and the like. I recommend that you close your eyes and prepare for a rough landing. The first few times, everyone stumbles.” Another reassuring smile was aimed their way, and Jean grabbed her cloak to throw it on. While the temperatures in the sun could be warm enough, the air was getting a bite to it in the shade and with some wind.

All three of them grabbed hold of the cord, and after getting a nod from both Jean and her husband, Xerxes spoke one word: “Departure.”

Jean felt a peculiar tug somewhere behind her navel, pulling her forward into something of a maelstrom of energy, tossing her about, to collide with both her husband and the older wizard. Only a moment later Jean felt her feet meet with a floor again. With weak knees she collapsed to sit on the floor, breathing hard. That had been… different.

“Are you both unharmed?” Xerxes asked of them, standing over them both, valiantly keeping his amusement to spread from his eyes to the rest of his face.

Fabian gave a snort at this, struggling to his feet before he offered his hand to help his wife up. “Some getting used to is putting it lightly. Is there any form of magical travel that is actually comfortable? Hermione told us about Floo-travel and mentioned that it involved a lot of spinning too.”

Xerxes got a pensive look at this question and then looked a little sheepish. “Well, I guess the most comfortable way to travel by magic is probably either apparating yourself or flying by broom in good weather.”

Not sure what they could say about that, the three of them started on a tour around the grounds and several buildings.

Jean was impressed. The classrooms were furnished and equipped with good sturdy furniture and materials. The small library had a wide range of books, both magical and non-magical, scientific books, and novels classical and new. The dormitories for those children without parents or from the foster-care system were nice and partially in use already. They could see children of various ages playing around the houses, or sitting in the common room, playing games, reading, and generally having a good time.

Both Jean and her husband used the time to ask various questions they had thought about since their last meeting. Most of them were about the customs they had observed: Why wizards still used parchment and quills, if there were traditional festivals or special days they observed, how the court system worked. They had much to ask. It was safe to say that Hermione had inherited her curiosity from her parents.

Around lunchtime they found their way into the dining hall, getting their food brought to them by the magic of house-elves. Both Jean and Fabian had heard much about them when Hermione had come home after the last school year. Apparently Hogwarts had a few hundred of these beings caring for the food for the students and maintenance of the castle. Hermione had likened their circumstances to those of slaves, making plans to free them all. Jean was torn over this matter, but could see clearly that it would help tremendously with caring for a school when there were several magical beings helping with the daily tasks.

While eating their warming soup, Fabian finally found the courage to ask a question he and Jean had mulled over for quite a while now. In fact, since Hermione had told them about how quick the process of adopting Harry by a man he had not known before had gone.
“Xerxes, we both were wondering how adoptions work under magical law.” He waved his spoon around, indicating all the children without proper families around them. “Hermione told us about Harry’s adoption, and we can’t help but wonder about the differences between the process she told us about and what we know about the same in our… culture.”

Taking a sip from his glass of water, Xerxes tilted his head a little to the side questioningly. “What are the differences? If you don’t mind me asking. I have to confess I have not cared much about this side of things. London takes care of all this bureaucratic nightmare.”

Jean snorted. Paperwork was really the bane of everyone's existence. Having magic or not, bureaucrats got everyone.

Nodding knowingly, Fabian sat his spoon down. “Well, there are several interviews and house visits involved. Singles are seldom granted the possibility to adopt, most of the time only married couples are approved. There are investigations into the finances, past criminal records, mental and general health of the aspiring parents… It’s an involved process. And then there's the consent of the child to get, if they're old enough.”

Xerxes nodded, eating the last spoonfuls of his soup. “That sounds involved indeed. We have nothing as elaborate. As we all are rather closely interrelated, and family magics and their secrets are so important, most of the time children without guardians go to the closest family. In fact, family overrides almost anything. I think it was something like this a few decades ago in the non-magical world as well? A school friend of mine had no family left, living in an orphanage in muggle London. He once told me when there was no known family, the church would take orphans in until they were of age. Providing a basic education and such. He painted a rather grim picture.” He was speaking in grave tones, clearly remembering a miserable young friend.

“What I know of historic practices for the care of children, I have to agree that it hasn’t been good, even not that far in the past,” Jean said, still not entirely satisfied with the answer. “But why is family so important? Even so important that Harry’s opinion wasn’t even asked? I got the impression that he was not happy to be adopted. And Hermione was beside herself with worry.” Jean and Fabian had talked about their feeling that Hermione was keeping something from them. Something important, they both agreed, but considering that they had no means to do anything in the magical part of Britain – seemingly being without many rights, as Professor McGonagall had explained on that first visit – seemingly being without many rights, as Professor McGonagall had explained on that first visit – they had decided to trust their daughter's judgement on what they needed to know and what they were better off not knowing. She was sixteen, after all. One year away from being an adult – legally – in her world.

Xerxes was hard to read, but Jean suspected that this was not something he was comfortable to speak about, normally he didn’t take this long to sort out what he wanted to say.

“Each family has developed specialized magic over time. A few have magical talents, metamorphmagi for instance, and the knowledge of how to control and use them. I have found several accounts of children showing the signs of strong talents in runes and charms being adopted into the family, as it is a speciality of ours.” He paused for a moment, further pondering what to say.

“I know it is hard to comprehend. But the Slytherin family was thought to be extinct. The name had vanished quite some time ago. But the talent of speaking to snakes – Parseltongue – has always been associated with the family. Whoever has it, is considered a member of the family. Only those of the family know everything about this gift. Someone having it needs to learn from the family to get the full use of it. I know nothing about the details of what it can achieve. And to ask would be beyond rude. It always has been tradition to give custody over children with a special talent to the
“Family this gift is associated with.” He shrugged a little, as if he was unsure what else to say.

“Tradition is important to you all, isn’t it?” Jean asked, more rhetorically than anything else. She didn’t expect a response.

“To preserve the knowledge and talents, the traditions have proven to be effective. But maybe it is time to reassess our approach to adoptions. This school is a start to changing our way of treating those born in magical families without access to magic themselves. Maybe it can be a starting point to change the treatment of our children as well.”

After they had finished their meals and looked at the rest of the houses, and spoke with the staff, Xerxes took the Grangers home again. It was a good feeling to be more involved with their daughter’s world, and maybe help to get Magicals to be more open to the rights of children. Someone had to start somewhere.

oooOOooo

It was Saturday.

Finally!

Breakfast had been a lively affair, the older years – third and up – excited for the first Hogsmeade weekend of the school year, the younger students happy that they would have the common rooms all to themselves, the favoured spots, normally occupied by the older students, free for them to use.

Harry had listened to the plans his friends made. Ron wanted to visit Honeydukes and Zonko’s, getting a ton of sweets and dungbombs. Hermione wanted to check out the bookshop, and of course she needed more parchment, as well as ink and quills. She also planned to take her camera along to get more pictures of the village and her friends to show to her parents.

Now they were on their way back down from the tower, bundled up in their winter cloaks, scarves, and hats. It was a dreary day, and if they were lucky, it would not start to rain.

Harry had told Ron that he would have at least one guard with him several times in the last week, but had not yet found the courage to tell him that Marvolo had decided to accompany Harry himself. So maybe he could go about this a little lopsided?

“Hermione, what has your uncle decided regarding the security measures?” It felt like a clever way to bring the topic up, but whether it would work, he would only get to know once Ron had heard it all.

“Uncle Xerxes is showing the school to my parents today. Term will start on Monday. They are all so excited! But because of that, he can’t come himself. He said that your guardian contemplated to go with you? I guess we could keep you company?” Her quick glance in Ron’s direction betrayed her worry over the redhead’s reaction.

“Harry’s going to hover around you all day, Harry?” Ron asked with a frown.

Harry nodded, apprehensive about what would come next. And probably looking like it, if he was to judge by Hermione’s concerned look and the even deeper frown forming on Ron’s face.
“Tough luck, man. Can’t imagine what it would be like to have dad or mum around in Hogsmeade.”

That had not been what Harry had expected to happen. “You know that if you want me to come along, he’ll be there too?” Harry asked, delicately prodding his friend to realize that Marvolo, the man who had created the diary which had possessed Ginny, would be with them all day.

“Yeah…” Ron made a grimace. “I'll just have to ignore him.” After a short pause and another grimace, Ron asked, digging in his robe pocket for his mittens, “Why does he need to come himself? Why not get some guards of some kind?”

Before Ron could get into naming people he would deem more appropriate guards, Harry made a grimace of his own. “Well, when we went to Diagon Alley, Crabbe and Goyle senior came along as guards…”

Ron shuddered over-dramatically. “You’re right. Doesn’t sound any better.”

Now they were surrounded by most of the other Ravenclaws and Gryffindors heading for the village and reached the entrance hall at the same time as many of the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs, coming up from the dungeons.

Harry spotted the dark green cloak of his guardian near the tartan robes of Professor McGonagall, who was there to check that all students going out had a signed permission slip. Changing direction and weaving among the others, Harry caught the end of the conversation Marvolo was having with Harry’s Head of House.

“If you get the letter to me by the end of next week, everything should work out, Lord Slytherin,” the professor said, several slips of parchment held in her hands.

“I will make sure then to send the letter as soon as possible. Thank you for your time, Professor.” Marvolo gave a small bow from the neck before he turned to the three teenagers approaching from the side. “Henry, Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley. I hope you are well, and have no objections to me being part of your party for this excursion.”

Harry was glad that Ron opted to only nod and murmur a return greeting, while Hermione made use of her etiquette training of the summer. “We're all very happy for you to escort us to the village today, Lord Slytherin. It's very generous of you to take the time out of your busy schedule to make it possible for us to visit the village at all.”

A horrified gasp from Ron made Harry spin, looking for an attack or something, only to find Ron staring at him with wide eyes. “I totally forgot, when Sirius escaped, the Headmaster made you stay in the castle. Anything is better than being stuck in the castle on a Hogsmeade weekend when all the others get to go!”

That sent both Harry and Hermione laughing as they stepped out of the door and into the unpleasant weather surrounded by other students on their way down to Hogsmeade.

ooOoo

Minerva watched sadly as three of her students – three that had caused her much worry over the years – walked laughing out of the castle. She was not sad that they were laughing, no, the fact that
they were still able to laugh was a ray of light. That no one had thought to grant Harry Potter time
to grieve for his parents on a day all others celebrated, that no one had thought to ask if he might
want to visit his parents’ graves… that was what made her sad.

That it had been Voldemort – she had taken her time calling him by that name, but once she had
overcome her reluctance she never stopped – to bring up the topic and suggest Harry visit Godric’s
Hollow.

She was ashamed.

Ashamed of herself and the Headmaster, and all the others that had chosen to ignore that the day
they celebrated the downfall of a Dark Lord was the day a boy had lost his parents.

Maybe Albus was wrong, and Tom Marvolo Riddle really was turning over a new leaf. He
certainly had done nothing violent, and by all accounts was very supportive of the Ministry and
their search for the newest escapees from Azkaban.

She banished those thoughts to the back of her mind when a student came up to her with a question
about the time they had to be back. Each year there were a few older students that wished to stay
longer than dinner time, and each year she had to explain why the rules were as they were.

ooOoo

“What were you speaking about with Professor McGonagall, sir?” Harry asked of Marvolo as they
walked along the path meandering down to the train station. Hermione and Ron on his other side
were listening intently, pausing their bickering about where to go first.

“I asked her about the conditions that need to be fulfilled to get a student out of lessons for one or
two days at a time. I regret to inform you that there are only a few viable reasons to ask for such a
thing, and invitations to social functions are not among them.” Marvolo looked serious, but quickly
let the mask fall to wink at Harry, making him smile.

Attempting to sound grave, Harry answered with his head held high. “I suppose I will survive.”

Ron spotted Dean and Seamus a little farther towards the village and dragged Hermione over to
them. “Dean said he wanted to buy ink too, if he fetches some for you, we can spend more time in
Honeydukes!”

.:And the real reason you asked about days off, sir?:. Harry hissed his question once his friends
were far enough away that they wouldn’t notice a conversation in Parseltongue.

.:You are getting more perceptive:. Marvolo nodded approvingly .:I wanted to know because I
wanted to offer you the option to be exempt from lessons on Halloween and the day after:. The
man walking by his side was not looking at Harry, but had his eyes trained on the group of
four teenagers arguing fiercely a few meters before them.

Harry was unsure what to feel. It had never crossed his mind that he might want to have a quiet day
on Halloween. For the longest time, he hadn’t even known that this was the day his parents had
died. If he had a day off from lessons, what would he do?

Before he could get deeper into the reasons why he never thought to ask, or why no one ever
offered, Marvolo hissed again. 

**:Some time in the next days, your godfather probably will ask you if you want to visit their graves. It is your decision, if you should not wish to go, you won’t have to. Neither will I force you to take the day off, if you want to attend classes.**

Did the man sound unsure? Harry blinked a few times. There still was some time till Halloween. Maybe he would speak with Mrs. Goyle about this. She was always good at simply listening. Lately Harry had realized that when trying to decide something, it could help just to rant at someone listening to sort out his confusing thoughts.

“I’ll think about it,” Harry managed to say, and they quickened their steps to catch up to Hermione and Ron at the first houses.

Harry’s two friends were still arguing about where to go first, when Marvolo simply spoke over both of them. “I propose that we go to Gladrags Wizardwear first. Henry needs to get warmer clothes. If we go there now, it is out of the way, and I will fade into the background.” Marvolo smirked at Harry’s groan and the following nasty look. Clothes shopping was not something Harry enjoyed. It was better having clothes that actually fit – thanks to Marvolo he now had that – but the hassle involved in getting them he could gladly do without.

To Harry’s immense relief, the time they spent in the stuffy shop of Gladrags was short. His measurements were taken – he actually had grown quite a bit since summer – and he got to choose between several swatches of cloth – all different in material, weave, and colour – as well as cuts for different pieces of clothing. Marvolo put in an order for new formal family robes, but after that they left.

On their way to the bookshop – Hermione had insisted and Ron had given in rather quickly, in Harry’s opinion – the green-eyed young wizard noticed a slightly pouting look on Ron’s face. He wandered over to his friend, while Marvolo kept his hand near his wand and all of them in his line of vision. “I’m glad that’s over,” Harry sighed. “I don’t look forward to the balls or whatnot I’ll have to wear those family robes to.”

After a short moment of confusion, Ron’s expression got sympathetic. “I hate the afternoon tea we have each year around Christmas with Aunt Muriel. Come on, let’s hurry, maybe we can get to Honeydukes faster if we make Hermione decide faster which books to get.”

The crisis averted before it could even start, Harry followed Ron at a slow trot – Hermione certainly was eager to get to the bookstore – thinking about the fact that Slytherin tactics more often than not proved to be useful, at least as long as he wasn’t caught. As his mind healer said, he just needed to learn what tactic was more promising to resolve a particular problem, and act accordingly.

ooOoo

Once they were on their way back, Harry walked once more alongside Marvolo, who had an eye on several other teenagers going back at the same time.

Ron was over with Seamus, discussing different ways they might manage to get alcoholic beverages into the dorm. Seamus was convinced that there was a way to conjure brandy, or at least transfigure it from water. Ron was not so sure, reciting some stories he had been told by his older brothers.
Hermione walked a few paces ahead, talking with Parvati and Lavender about the diversity of hair charms, a field of study she had discovered during the summer. She was more interested in the theory behind the charms and how to adapt them to different types of hair, than she was in the beauty application. But that did nothing to disrupt the discussion among the girls, comparing real-life experience with theory from books.

“I have wondered why Pettigrew is never mentioned in any of the newspaper articles. Rita Skeeter had real fun writing the most gruesome stories about each and every one of them, but he’s not mentioned in any of the articles. I would have thought she would relish dragging that story back up.” And Harry had wondered, most of the time he had avoided the endless speculation, and then had been easily distracted by his lessons and friends.

“Well, it is quite simple, really,” Marvolo answered, strolling along, seemingly relaxed. “No one knew about him. And I mean not a single one.”

“So, they just didn’t know they might want to get him out?” Harry asked, surprised at how simple an explanation it was.

“Exactly. Why should they know he was even there? Why should they care? The Daily Prophet doesn’t deliver to Azkaban.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence. Marvolo still keeping an eye out for any dangers, and Harry contemplating once again how much his life had changed in just a few short months.

How would Christmas this year go? He tried not to hope for too much, or hope at all. Too often in the past his hopes had been crushed rather harshly.

Chapter End Notes

I was surprised that not one of you speculated about who would be the new Defence against the Dark Arts Professor :D I hope you will like my idea. He will not be a big part of the story but I always wondered who would write a book like the one Umbridge selected, and so decided he would be a nice addition.

More than one reviewer asked about the seeming ease Marvolo had in adopting Harry. While I agree that it is an appalling system they have in wizarding Britain, I think it can’t be really like anything we know in the world today (not that those systems are anywhere near perfect). Otherwise they would have done something about Uncle Algie and what he did to Neville, and never would have let a school Headmaster decide where to place a toddler. I added the scene with the Grangers and Xerxes to explain a little better. (The time the wizards seem to be stuck in was not one considering children as having rights or opinions of their own… not right and hardly ideal, but that is how I see the wizarding world and their view of children from the political point of view.)

At least one reviewer asked about Pettigrew, and I have to admit that I totally had forgotten about his being in Azkaban when the other Death Eaters were fleeing. But then I started to think. How would the others know about his being there at all? How would they even know he was a Death Eater? So… I guess the answer is really that simple.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
With another set of adjusted wand movements to the rather long incantation, the young Unspeakable tried her new spell on the empty parchment she had written on. When the project idea had been brought forward, she had jumped at the opportunity to create a new spell all the others found not interesting or useful enough to bother with.

She watched in rapt attention from under her hood as a pale light began shimmering around the parchment’s edges. It shone for a few moments, only for the energy to rise to a few centimetres above the object she was using to test the spell, coalescing into a globe moving like flowing water suspended in the air. The globe was filled and frosted over, creating a sphere surrounding another sphere, slightly smaller.

When she had finished her incantation, the witch extended her hand to catch the small, transparent but shimmering frozen bubble – her mind kept offering up a memory of her watching a bubble of soap water freezing over in the winter cold, laughing over the wondrous phenomenon – and the much smaller one suspended within.

The small bead-like sphere started to glow the moment her fingers touched the bauble. So far everything seemed to work as she had intended.

Setting aside the first successfully created touch-sphere – a working title in need of improvement – she levitated over another parchment they had used to decide the holiday plans of the department. She herself hadn’t so far touched it.

After she had finished casting the spell, she had a second bauble sitting on the desk. This one had several different-coloured beads inside, all floating serenely, not one of them glowing. Tentatively touching the sphere didn’t cause any of the beads to light up. So the basic properties seemed to be matching with what had been the goal. But they would need more extensive testing to be sure it worked as planned.

Gathering her arithmantic calculations, her research on the proper incantation – there always were possible variants – her sample parchments, and the two spheres, she left the laboratory in search of some of her co-workers. Now that she had a working prototype, it would be easier to find someone to help her testing. They all had fun finding the borders of some new spell, potion, or artefact once it was created. Her mind was already whirling with the possible borders to test. How long would the spheres last? Did the time since someone had touched the object tested have any effect? Was there a maximum on the number of people that could be detected? How large an object could the use? Would touches from other beings register too? There was so much to look into!

Maybe she would get input from the Aurors as well. After all, they had been the department asking for this spell to be developed.

She had a rather enjoyable time before her.

oooO0ooo
After teaching a spell to the whole Auror division, Marvolo walked at a leisurely pace back to the atrium. It had been a rather amusing experience. Once he had shown them the wand movement and incantation – getting the right pronunciation into their heads had been the hardest part about teaching the spell – they had cast the spell at each other and started asking questions. As he had explained at the Wizengamot session, the spell didn’t force an answer, but rather indicated by a glow surrounding the person whether he or she was telling the truth. If an outright lie was told the glow would turn almost black. Evasion and half-truths would turn the glow darker by a measure relative to the degree of deception. Through their experimenting by asking one Auror about his new girlfriend and if he had managed to get invited to her room yet – the poor man had blushed a bright crimson – they quickly learned that refusing to answer would not change the glow to a darker shade. Others had been asked equally embarrassing questions and had managed to answer honestly because the questions had been worded poorly. They had improved rapidly after that.

Once Marvolo had been sure they had it down, he had left, leaving the Aurors to their experimenting, closing the door behind himself on rumbustious laughter.

Halfway to the elevators, the wizard walking with a little spring in his step was intercepted by the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones. “May I ask for a moment of your time, Lord Slytherin?”

With a small polite smile Marvolo bowed, it was obvious she still was suspicious of him – and truthfully with good reason, but without proof – but always so proper, following the rules. “What can I do for you, Madame Bones?” It always was good to appear willing to work together with the law enforcement.

“I hoped you could confirm or refute some rumours currently making their rounds here at the Ministry.” Marvolo was not entirely sure, but it felt like she was doubting something. What it was she had doubts about was unclear, though. Did she doubt the rumours were just rumours? Or that they held even a grain of truth?

“Here or in your office?” Marvolo asked politely, clearly implying that it might be prudent to move a discussion to a place where they would not be so easily overheard.

“My office. If you would please follow me, Lord Slytherin.” She turned briskly, not waiting to see if he actually would follow.

Marvolo smirked. It was not often that he encountered someone daring to be anything but polite and courteous towards him. Dark looks were aimed at him regularly, but few dared to show their disdain when directly faced with him.

In a way it was refreshing. Marvolo wondered if he would tire of it eventually.

Once they had reached the witch’s office Marvolo was offered a seat with a wave of her hand, while she walked around her desk to sit behind it.

“Thanks to the information you have provided, we were able to close several old missing-person cases. There are several rumours circulating. I guess there is no prison hidden away where You-Know-Who incarcerated several of those still missing or believed dead?” She used the ridiculous moniker with quite a big dose of sarcasm.

Really surprised – where had that rumour come from? – Marvolo let the emotion show on his face before he let his mask settle over his features again. “That’s the first time I have heard that particular rumour. Do you know where it started? Whoever came up with it should get an award for creativity.”
“No, but I was asked repeatedly if there was a chance it was true and promised to ask should I get the opportunity.” She placed a quill back on its resting place next to the unadorned inkwell sitting at the top of her working space. “Lord Black mentioned that you said something about retrieving his late brother’s body from a hiding place that had been prepared sometime during the war?”

The bluntness of some people never ceased to amaze him, but there was no doubt that Black would talk about their arrangement with the fierce witch. It had been some time since he had promised to get the body out of the lake filled with Inferi, and until now he only had fulfilled the part pertaining to his providing information on witches and wizards he had killed himself or had seen killed. If this was Black’s attempt to get him to move, it was a surprisingly Slytherin move to make.

Marvolo inclined his head to confirm this story. “I promised him to try a recovery of Regulus Black’s body. That is true. And it is a fact that he probably fell victim to some protections that were set in place but were never used.” He spoke haltingly, always aware that he had to make it seem as if he only reluctantly remembered what he still knew of the life he had led before his body had been destroyed. “I’m still trying to find a way to do so without risking my own life in the process.”

“What protections could there be that would be that dangerous but still allow a body to be found after all these years?” She was not one to be fooled easily.

“It is an underground lake filled with Inferi. If he was killed there, his body would rest in the waters alongside all the others.” It was almost easy to let a small shiver run over his body when he thought how many more magicals there could be in Britain if he wouldn’t have killed so many. He really had done some serious damage to their population.

“You surely know enough to be in no danger from a protection you have laid down yourself? It would be rather useless if you couldn’t reach whatever was protected.” She quirked a brow at him and Marvolo had to smirk.

“You are right, I still know enough. But I checked. While it is not illegal to know, it is quite illegal to use, teach, or learn the magic needed to control and create Inferi. I wonder… is knowing only legal because they didn’t want to obliviate the knowledge out of those that learned about it while it was still legal?” And he had indeed checked. He needed to keep his public actions strictly legal if he wanted to reach his goals and keep Henry safe. He didn’t know for sure, but he would guess he just had stated the most likely reason for this legal oddity.

“So you only have not proceeded with this, Lord Slytherin, because you can’t come up with a legal way to do so safely?” Her incredulousness was showing clearly on her face. Marvolo silently agreed with her, it was silly considering everything. But he had to stick to the rules in public, so he did.

“That is indeed the reason for the delay, Madame Bones,” he nodded and folded his hands to rest them on his knee, crossing his legs to sit more comfortably.

The grey-haired witch frowned in contemplation. “Why don’t you apply for a curse-breaker license? It would give you the right to use your knowledge under special circumstances, like this endeavour to dismantle a lake full of Inferi.” The frown turned into a glare. “You lifted that curse Headmaster Dumbledore was suffering from.” There was an accusation in her voice.

Smiling a little sheepishly, Marvolo changed the way he had arranged his legs. “Well, technically the counter-curse I used is not illegal. It was created together with the curse the Headmaster carelessly triggered, and does not fall under any of the stipulations the Ministry enforces in regards to magic that is deemed dark.” Marvolo had trouble keeping the sneer from his face, his ruby-red
eyes from breaking through the glamour he always wore in public. What Augustus had found so far about what the Ministry defined as Dark and why was appalling. But Marvolo would have to stay focused and patient. It would be years before he would be able to risk attempting to tackle that special tangle of garbage the Ministry had created over the course of many decades if not centuries.

Madam Bones nodded, seemingly easily accepting his word.

“And if I’m informed correctly, I would need several NEWTs before I would be able to apply for a curse-breaker license. And by the regulations, I only can take a NEWT a year after I successfully completed the corresponding OWL.”

The witch on the other side of the desk rubbed her forehead tiredly. Another fan of paperwork it seemed. “You are correct. I think… there is a way to get a short-term permission… if I remember correctly it is used by some of those families with really old wards to maintain them. Of course there is some looking the other way involved regarding the way they got the knowledge to even cast the magic needed, but… that’s not relevant at the moment. If you want I can get my assistant to look up what you would need to do to get such a temporary permission. And for increased chances for success, I would recommend hiring an actual curse-breaker.”

That actually was good advice, and maybe the Weasley he had met on the occasion of the rescue of Albus Dumbledore would be good to work with. The man had shown interest and knowledge for the field of exotic magic widely considered dark. Sure, the interest was mainly motivated by the need to dismantle dangerous curses, helping others. But there was some genuine academic interest as well, and if nothing else it could be a starting point for a good working relationship – always a good idea to have someone who was able to deal with goblins – or some interesting conversation.

“I will consider your advice, Madame Bones. And I would appreciate information on those temporary permissions.”

They exchanged the customary, empty pleasantries before Marvolo finally made his way out of the Ministry and back to his paperwork. Trying to accumulate some money for House Slytherin and maintaining the Potter assets was not easy and did consume quite a lot of his time.

OOOOOO

On their way to the Defence lesson on Monday, the whole of Gryffindor fifth-years was jittery with anticipation. The stories told about the new professor had grown over the weekend, making it almost impossible to discern reality from imaginations running wild.

Shortly after they had settled into their seats, Professor Slinkhard walked into the room, and walked over to the teacher’s desk right next to the blackboard, leaning back against it. “Welcome, class,” the elderly man said with a mild smile, looking them all over. “You had quite the selection of teachers in the past, or so I have gathered. And the last one used a book for all years that I had intended for the use with a much younger audience.” He sadly shook his head maintaining his smile.

Curious glances were exchanged between the students, all of them unsure if this was a good sign or not.

“And all this when you have important exams to look forward to at the end of the year. So I guess
we will have to concentrate on the theory you will need to know for the written exam, and practice those practical parts we can’t avoid. I already asked the Headmaster to provide some dummies or targets for the unavoidable spell practice.”

They all exchanged glances again. Unavoidable practice? He certainly didn’t sound like casting spells was something he enjoyed teaching, rather avoiding it when possible at all. Not really a promising start.

“But before I decide what you need to learn so you can pass your exams at the end of this year, you all will fill in this test, so I can get an impression on your level of expertise.”

Sheets of parchment floated, directed by the professor’s wand, from the desk to each of the students. Harry quickly scanned the questions and quickly noticed that the professor probably didn’t intend to test their skill with actually casting spells. There were several questions with little yes and no boxes to tick, asking if he had cast the spell named before. Harry snorted at this approach at a test. Anyone could claim to actually have cast a spell before. And even if not one of them lied, these questions did nothing to differentiate between levels of skill.

Resigning himself to another terrible teacher for Defence against the Dark Arts, Harry started to fill in the answers to the sometimes really mind-numbing questions. While his quill scratched over the parchment, he thought he could hear Hermione’s unhappy grumbling. She really was invested in doing well in the OWL exams, and the prospect of maybe getting a competent teacher for this important year had her hoping, despite their experience until now.

Only half of the lesson time was over when they had finished filling in their assessment tests. Summoning the parchments back to himself, the Professor sat down on his desk looking over his class. “Once I have a better understanding of what you still need to learn for your OWLs, I will present you with a lesson plan hopefully able to make you all capable of passing the exams. Until then, I want you to tell me what can cause conflict, what different types of conflicts you know of, and what way you would try to resolve conflict without resorting to violence. Well? Who wants to go first?”

There followed a largely philosophical lesson which caused so much confusion, some disinterested students doodling on their parchment, and a lively debate between the professor and only a few – mostly female – students.

They all were relieved once the bell sounded and they could leave.

ooOoo

That evening in the common room Hermione took a last look at the chapter about study groups and school clubs. She had hoped the new professor would teach a reasonable syllabus, but judging by the questions he had asked and the way he had talked, she concluded that they would get a good grasps on the theory, but it was questionable whether they would be able to get much practical experience.

Harry sat near the fireplace opposite from Ron and surrounded by the whole Quidditch team. It looked like they were planning more training sessions and strategy.

Steeling her resolve, the bushy-haired witch – she had noticed that using charms to tame her hair
each morning made it incredibly frizzy with time, so she had started to alternate between different spells and days she wouldn't use any at all – took her notes and walked over to her two friends.

“Harry, do you have a moment?” she asked him, drawing all attention from the group to her immediately.

“Sure,” the green-eyed teenager answered easily, shifting his foot from being tucked under his other knee to the floor as if he planned to stand.

“What do you want to talk about?” Ron demanded to know, only to get cuffed over his head by one of the twins.

“Don’t be rude, Ronniekins. It might be something private.” The twin wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, causing Hermione to blush furiously.

To counter the rumours that would spread if she was to go off with her friend, Hermione huffed and sat down on a big pillow placed on the ground. “Nothing private. I guess you might have use of it too.”

Now they were starting to gather an audience, something Hermione had wished she could avoid. Harry was so skittish about attention being directed at him, and he likely would have a problem with her proposition anyway.

“I think you'll agree with me that Professor Slinkhard will not really teach us the practical side of Defence.” Agreeing nods and murmurs all around followed this simple declaration. “We might or might not get all the theory we need for the OWLs and NEWTs this year. But practically, we are at a huge disadvantage. Almost none of our teachers have been able to teach this aspect.” More nods and curious expressions. “I think we need someone else to teach us. Someone with experience in learning without a teacher’s guidance, instinct about what can help in a given situation, and imagination to apply spells creatively.”

“You want to start a study group?” Angelina asked, clearly intrigued. She was one of the few students who had made it into NEWT-level Defence. The steady stream of different professors year after year had made it rather hard to get a good grasp on the material. And besides that, only a few students were dedicated enough to the subject to endure the constantly changing teachers any further after the OWLs were finished and the students could drop all the subjects they no longer wanted to take.

“In a way. To really learn and offer the opportunity to as many as possible, we likely would have to form a club. I read up on the requirements. We need a student heading the club, and a professor as a sort of sponsor. I thought we might ask Professor Flitwick to be our sponsor. He was a duelling champion before he started to teach, so I guess he might be interested.” It was obvious that the other Gryffindors were interested, only Harry looked slightly apprehensive. He had become much more perceptive since the summer.

“And who are you thinking about setting in charge of the whole thing?” Harry asked rather pointedly, tucking his foot back onto his seat under his other leg.

Hermione smiled ruefully. He had caught on. “Well, I had hoped that you would take the lead.” Holding up her hand, Hermione stopped the rant he was about to start on. “The way you learned the spells last year, the fact that you've had the best marks in Defence in each year we had a remotely competent teacher, that you can cast the Patronus charm… I think you're the best for the job, Harry. I truly do.”
Her friend still looked sceptical. “You did most of the research for those spells last year. You're wonderful at explaining, much better than I ever could. Why don’t you take the lead on that one?”

Waving her hand at the people surrounding them, indicating their doubtful faces, Hermione answered her friend's claim, “If it were a group to learn about theory I would be a credible choice, but we want to learn practical application. And as you see, most don’t think I’m all that capable at practical defence.” Before she could continue to list her arguments – it wasn't a really long list, but she had gathered quite a few more – Harry interrupted her again.

“But that’s incredibly unfair. You and Ron have been there for almost all of my adventures. You have really good marks in Defence as well. You're as good, if not a better choice.” Hermione knew that stubborn look on her friend's face. It was the same he had sported when he had gotten a broom from an unknown benefactor for Christmas of their third year. She had to find something to convince him, and rather fast, before he got it in his head to insist on her heading the club.

“You remember that devil's snare, first year? I couldn’t remember that I could light fire with my wand. I tend to freeze in a situation I have to think fast. Always trying to see all possible solutions and weighting which is the best, is not so good an approach in a situation with limited time before there is no more time to decide.”

Ron rolled his eyes and interjected. “Why don’t you share the post? Hermione can manage all the stuff there surely is, and do the research. And Harry will pull the people in, being famous will help to find people we can practice with and on.” That got a laugh out of many Gryffindors. It always was a struggle to find someone to practice the hexes they sometimes learned on. Being a willing target for a stinging hex, for instance, was not a favoured pastime.

Harry nodded slowly, giving Hermione hope that they could make this work. “I can’t really see why you would have me as a teacher, but okay. As long as we don’t only offer it to the Gryffindors I’m in, with Hermione as the other leader.”

Ron pulled a face. “But no Slytherins, I hate it when we have classes together with them. Can’t we just keep them out?” the red-head almost whined, earning himself another slap over the head from one of his brothers.

“No, the club will be open to all,” Harry insisted just as Hermione explained, “Official clubs can’t exclude a whole house. They can state an age limit, though.”

They spoke a while longer about Hermione’s idea, collecting ideas for spells they wanted to learn, guessing who might want to attend, when the best time would be, and where to meet. Harry and Hermione agreed to write up the club idea in the form of a proposal by the end of the week, so they could ask Professor Flitwick soon. There was only so much time they had for OWL preparation, and Hermione wasn’t willing to waste more of that precious resource on ranting about incompetent teachers.

The witch later watched her dazed friend walk up the staircase to the boys' dorms together with Ron. She was sure he would make a wonderful teacher. The way he had asked clarifying questions to some of the spells they had him learn last year, indicated that he had an almost instinctual grasp for defensive and offensive magic. It wasn't really a wonder he sometimes had trouble with the theory.
After lessons, but before dinner on Tuesday, the circular office of the Headmaster of Hogwarts filled rapidly with people. The two Aurors still working on the attack on the Quidditch pitch, Proudfoot and Savage, Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, four students – from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw – and four parents were all in the room.

On first glance, the most unusual thing was the portraits on the walls. Deviating from their normal routine, all former Headmasters were awake and listening attentively.

The atmosphere was tense. Albus was worried. Until now, he always had managed to shield those students who were a little too boisterous in their exploration of the world. Had been able to deflect the direst consequences heaped all too easily on the young for understandable errors. Most of the time, Gryffindors were the only students courageous enough to follow their desires and venture where others dared not tread. A trait to be encouraged and not curtailed... at least in Albus’ opinion.

He carefully studied the diverse group gathered before his desk. Cormac McLaggen tried to look unaffected, but clearly was not, his father looked put-out and impatient. The two Aurors were full of anticipation. Minerva seemed to be irritated, she tended to not agree with his wish to shield children from too-harsh punishments. Filius had his hands clasped behind his back, standing as tall as he could manage in support of the only Ravenclaw student currently present. Mr. Belby – the father of that lone Ravenclaw – looked quite grim, the boy stoic. Taking the nervous fidgeting of Mr. Summers and Mr. Parker into account, it seemed as if the Aurors truly had managed to find the students who had been the ones behind that ill-thought-out prank.

“I believe we should not dawdle,” Albus took charge of the situation. They were in his office, in his school, and therefore it was only natural that he take the lead. “So that we all will be on time for an excellent meal in the Great Hall.” A smile graced his wrinkled face.

“All right, Headmaster,” Auror Proudfoot said in a rather curt tone, turning so he had all four students and their respective parent in view. “I have here,” the man held up a scroll of parchment with a ribbon and seal marking it as an official order from the Ministry for all to see, “the written permission to interrogate the students Marcus Belby, Cormac McLaggen, John Parker, and Jonas Summers pertaining to the attack on Heir Slytherin earlier in September.” Albus was almost certain he could see a happy glimmer in the wizard’s eyes, as he placed the scroll back into a pocket in his red robes. “We will use a spell indicating the truth of what is spoken, rather than Veritaserum. There are no adverse effects known for this spell. Who wants to go first?”

Before Albus could come up with something to say – he still hoped to get the four boys out of the bigger trouble, loss of house points or a month of detentions should be enough to help them find their way back to the path keeping them in the light – Mr. McLaggen huffed with a rapidly reddening face.

Not holding on to his anger, the portly wizard started to rant. “I find this whole situation preposterous! What evidence do you even have to demand answers from my son? I will not give consent for my son to be interrogated under an untested spell!” By the end of his tirade the Ministry official – Albus was not entirely sure which department the man worked in, but knew he held an important position – was out of breath and sweat was dropping down the side of his face.

“Well, there are three other students who we can ask our questions first. Naturally, the one being the most cooperative can gain some benefits should our suspicions prove true,” Savage said nonchalantly, giving a half-smile and turning to the other two Gryffindors and the one Ravenclaw with the blue and bronze tie.
Blessedly they all stayed silent. If they only stuck to their story, Albus should be able to defuse the attention and find a way to get the investigation dropped. With Harry in Tom’s hands, Albus had to find another way to rescue their society from the Dark Lord. Maybe those brave lads and their dislike for dark magic and wizards could be those carrying on this noble goal.

“So, Mr. Parker? Mr. Summers? Mr. Belby? Still convinced it’s a good idea to continue lying? If no one volunteers we will pick one of you to start with. There is no need to worry over the spell. We all had it cast on us earlier this week. It causes neither pain nor discomfort, and doesn’t force answers. So it is completely safe.”

With dismay the old Headmaster noticed covert glances being exchanged between Mr. Belby and his father. It was most likely that the odd Ravenclaw in this group would betray his friends in an attempt to get himself out of trouble. That the supposedly so intelligent could be so oblivious to the one simple truth that working together with your allies would serve you best. It was a conundrum.

“I agree to being the first to answer your questions under the truth spell, Auror Proudfoot,” The younger Mr. Belby said, stepping a little away from his Head of House – who looked proud if sad – and his father. His voice wavered at first but then got firmer toward the end of his declaration.

“Very well. I will cast the spell,” the Auror said, getting out his wand, casting a spell with a complex wand movement and strange-sounding incantation.

A low glow surrounded Mr. Belby who looked curiously down at his own hands. Filius’ eyes were wide with curiosity, but appropriate to the grave situation the part-goblin reined in his need for knowledge.

With growing trepidation, Albus watched ruin unfold.

“Where were you, Mr. Belby, on the evening during the time several persons attacked Mr. Henry Slytherin-Potter on the Quidditch pitch of this school?” The question was short and to the point. Albus started to plan a way to get the punishment to be lowered. It wouldn’t be right to send the boys to Azkaban over a prank.

Marcus took a deep breath and then started to talk in a bland monotone manner. “I was down at the Quidditch pitch. We all went down there to cheer Cormac on. He wanted a place on the Gryffindor team, as keeper, and the captain wanted to decide between Weasley – the younger, not the twins, but Ronald – and Cormac that day. Cormac didn’t get the place. He was angry. We tried to get his mind off of the fact he had lost to Weasley. When we made our way back to the castle some time after the team practice, we noticed that someone was still flying.” The glow remained steady around the boy’s body the whole time. Neither changing intensity nor colour.

And there again, a friend betraying his comrades. Sad that it was a theme repeating itself so often.

“Who all was part of the we you speak about?” Auror Savage asked, totally unconcerned by the venomous glare the young McLaggen sent his friend from the House of the Raven.

Mr Belby silently fidgeted, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. The glow stayed the same. “Cormac was there, and I was there…” The boy hesitated and the glow got a darker tint to it.

“You said, and I quote, we all went down there to cheer Cormac on. Sounds to me that you were at least with two others besides your friend Cormac,” Proudfoot prompted not unkindly.

“Jonas, John, and me. And Cormac. We were down there. When Cormac spotted Potter, he said he wanted to take him down a peg. He said I should keep a look-out. I heard heavy things fall down,
found the others on the ground. We didn’t wait around after I revived them. That’s the truth.” The boy sounded like the child he still was, petulant, unhappy about what was happening, his eyes firmly on the spot of carpet right before his feet.

“Lies!” Mr. McLaggen shouted from across the room, causing more than one portrait to jump in surprise by the sudden increase in volume. “Not one word of all that nonsense is true at all!”

“That actually is not true, Mr. McLaggen. What we just heard is the truth as Mr. Belby knows it. The steady glow is proof of that,” Auror Proudfoot stated with calm authority, silencing the enraged wizard easily.

Albus rose to his feet when the Auror turned to face him, mind whirling on his search for some way out of this mess. Sometimes he wished teenagers would think a little more than they usually did.

“I formally request that these four students be suspended from lessons, so we can get the remaining investigation done as quickly as possible. The young wizards will be placed under house arrest with their parents until the time they are either cleared or arrested.”

Setting his face into his most grandfatherly benevolent mask, Albus tried a disarming smile. “I hardly think that such drastic measures are necessary. If they stay here at the castle, they would be quite safe and their education won't be interrupted. After all, this whole affair was blown out of proportion.” He spread his hands out in a way that communicated the helplessness they all suffered in the face of Ministry procedures and bureaucracy.

While Mr. McLaggen nodded frantically, the students looked either stony or desperate, Minerva and Filius had both pressed their lips into thin lines, sporting a similarity Albus hadn’t spotted before today. His focus, however, lay on the two Aurors who didn’t agree with him.

“Neither of us is responsible for the decision whether this matter was exaggerated or not. If you will not suspend the students and send them home with their parents – who will sign a statement declaring they acknowledge their responsibility to keep their children home and under constant supervision – we will arrest them now under suspicion of attempted murder. There is no other way at this point in time.”

Albus cast a silent, wandless Legilimency probe – he had mastered this special, useful trick a few decades back by now – to skim Auror Proudfoot’s surface thoughts. Maybe he would get a pointer on how to reach his short-time goal – keeping the boys in Hogwarts – this way. He was deeply disappointed when he encountered solid Occlumency shields just behind those steely eyes.

Ignoring a devastated Mrs. Parker’s sobbing, Albus had to admit defeat – for the moment – and averted his eyes to focus on Minerva and Filius. “Escort the students to their dormitories so they can pack their possessions, please, Minerva, Filius.” Both Heads of House nodded and started to usher their students and their parents out of the circular office.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Headmaster.” Both Aurors gave him curt short bows from the neck, before they left and the door closed behind them.

Once Albus was alone again he sank back into his chair, rubbing his eyes behind his spectacles. What to do, now that the Aurors had some proof… maybe he should instead work on creating tension between Harry and Tom? If he got Harry to run away from his guardian, he might be able to cast doubt on Tom’s suitability to raise a child. Normally it would not do much, but in the case of the Boy-Who-Lived, it might be enough.
The moment Albus closed the door behind himself on his way down to the Great Hall, a lively discussion erupted behind him in his office between the portraits. As soon as he set a foot back into his office he was likely to get an earful of unwanted advice from all the former Headmasters and Headmistresses.

With a sigh the current Headmaster of Hogwarts started on his way down to dinner.

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With a slight hump Harry sat down his heavy book-bag next to his feet under the table. He had just returned from a study session with his Slytherin friends, and Hermione, down in one empty classroom on the first floor. Madame Pince frowned upon spellcasting in her domain so to practice for transfiguration they had to meet elsewhere. Not for the first time since he had started to associate more with students from other Houses, Harry wondered why there was no inter-house common room of some kind.

They had run late, so both he and Hermione had decided not to run up to the tower to stow away their bags but to go to the Great Hall. The Slytherins – Theo, Draco, Daphne and both Grab and Goyle – had opted to go down to the dungeons before going to dinner. Harry tried to be confident they did so because their way was shorter and not because they didn’t want to walk in with two Gryffindors.

Ron’s arrival from his special chaser/keeper training session interrupted Harry’s self-doubts. The red-head let himself fall into the seat next to Harry. “Training went really well! Next training is Friday. With the whole team again.”

They all settled down while the other students and their professors trickled in through the door, eager to start on the meal after a long day studying, or teaching.

The food appeared before the Headmaster while people were still coming in, only on the few big feasts did the food only appear after the Headmaster had called for it. Ron instantly started to fill his plate with chicken parts, beans, and potatoes. “I wanted to ask if you have time tomorrow for some drills on the pitch. I don’t want to let Angelina down. After all, she chose me over McLaggen.” After that Ron concentrated on his food, seemingly having worked up an appetite from flying in the cold weather.

Harry had just started filling his own plate with various vegetables, a big helping of potatoes, and one sausage, when the Headmaster made an appearance and instead of sitting down, stayed standing behind the head table, waiting.

One by one the students fell silent, the usual murmur fading into an uneasy silence. Harry and his fellow Gryffindors concentrated on the Headmaster, some continuing to eat.

“I have the sad responsibility to inform you all that four students have been suspended for the duration of an Auror investigation and will be now returning to their homes. Because you would know their names by morning anyway, I will give them to you now.” The Headmaster made a pause and Harry felt his heart racing. There was no other Auror investigation he knew of beside the one trying to find who had attacked him. Had they really found those that had almost killed him?

“Mr. Belby from Ravenclaw, Mr Summers, Mr. McLaggen, and Mr. Parker from Gryffindor, will
be suspended until the investigation is closed. There is no reason not to write to your friends. I’m sure the whole matter will be cleared up in no time.” A wave of the Headmaster’s hand sent the hall into turmoil as the student body started to discuss the minimalistic announcement.

“Are they the ones that attacked Harry?” Ron’s question was the last Harry heard clearly before his head was filled with questions of his own, feeling strangely light. Professor Dumbledore had not said what the investigation was about, but it was highly unlikely to be one no one at the school knew about. Such news always made it through the whole school before a day was out.

So, was it over now? Would he be safe again? Well, at least safer than he had been while his attackers had been free to roam?

But no! Harry stopped himself from jumping to conclusions. The four only were suspended during the ongoing investigation. Nothing was safe or finished yet. There always were ways around rules and laws. That so many Death Eaters had walked free... most of them had their money to thank for that. In a system so prone to favouritism, blackmail, and bribes, nothing was quite as clear-cut as things should be in court. That much Harry had learned during his life, and his lessons this summer had only confirmed what he already knew.

A nudge to his chin dragged him back to the present. Hermione gave him a pointed glare, nodding her head in Ron’s direction who was rambling on at Harry’s side.

“Can’t believe that three of those... those... ruffians are Gryffindors! Attacking one of our own! Cowardly, casting stunners at someone flying! I know at least one of them had to be a Gryffindor, otherwise they never would have managed some of those... those pranks!” The sad, forlorn look on his friend’s face made Harry reach out and pat him on the arm.

“Yeah, it’s hard to understand. But remember, Wormtail was a Gryffindor too, so whatever House someone is sorted into... it’s not really an indication, is it?” Harry didn’t really believe that it was as impossible as Ron seemed to think it was. After they had learned that he was a parselmouth, all of Gryffindor had turned against him. The widely believed stereotypic images of the four Hogwarts Houses just didn’t line up with what Harry had learned so far in his time here. Not all Slytherins seemed to be cunning or ambitious. Or at least some of them were good at hiding it. Crabbe and Goyle came to mind. And neither were they all cowards and back-stabbers, likely to poison your food.

And Gryffindors... not all of them were brave, or did only the right thing.

If his own experience with the Sorting Hat was any indication, individual wishes – for instance, not embarrassing ones family – could influence the placement of students greatly. Relying on those superstitions could prove to be a real problem.

But sadly, Harry was almost certain that he wouldn’t be able to explain his doubts to his first friend just now, or anytime soon. Ron might be growing up, but he seemed to be taking a leisurely pace in doing so.

Resolved to make the best of his would-be assassins being gone, Harry resumed eating. Maybe they would have the time to let Ron grow more mature and would be able to remain friends despite all the odds against them.

Still curious if there was more to know about the Auror investigation, Harry decided he would call Marvolo on the mirror right after going up to the tower after dinner. The man certainly would know more, and was likely to answer questions Harry would ask.
Appearing in a clearing in the middle of an autumn-coloured forest, Marvolo cast a few detection spells and let his gaze roam. He wouldn’t put it past the werewolf to try an ambush or something else ridiculous. After all, he had placed the man’s request for a meeting at the bottom of his priority list.

Barty had informed him quite early on that Fenrir Greyback had sent a short note more or less demanding a meeting. Unsure of what to do with the man, anticipating his wish for more violence and acting as a tool for intimidation, Marvolo simply had ordered Barty to answer with a decline as there was no time at that particular moment.

Now, after he had his escaped followers around, Marvolo had even less time, but had been made aware that leaving the man on his own might lead to problems further down the road. If the werewolf were to act on his own, disaster could strike, undoing all the work he had done on getting better laws for the majority of the werewolf population.

Marvolo had selected this out-of-the-way clearing because it was one he had used before. The last time – if he remembered correctly – had been for an initiation ceremony roughly a year before he had gone after the Potters. Selecting a log placed conveniently in the middle, the wizard in one of his heavier dark cloaks cast a cushioning charm at it before he sat down. Why should he sit uncomfortably when magic was at his disposal? Listening to the wards and alerts he had placed here just this morning, Marvolo prepared to wait.

And he had to wait. When the sound of apparation finally heralded the arrival of the man – he had trouble calling this particular werewolf a wizard – who had asked for this meeting, Marvolo had had enough of listening to the animals of the woods and their sounds.

“So you finally have found time, Lord Slytherin,” sneered the werewolf, even as he made a low and exaggerated bow towards the wizard sitting on his log as if on a throne.

The man had found some backbone, or he simply had forgotten that the Dark Lord was much more powerful and skilled. A brow rising in a mocking gesture, Marvolo stayed silent, sitting regally, one hand caressing his trustworthy wand.

“You are back again, and I wanted to offer mine and my pack's services. But considering you seem to be into domesticating what should be wild and free, I shouldn’t wonder you made me wait.” An ugly sneer exposed the pointed fangs Fenrir had created out of his teeth.

“I have been busy,” Marvolo replied neutrally. If he was correct, Fenrir would cause problems in the near future. The wolf’s tendencies for violence, and his goal to create so many werewolves that they could exterminate the normal wizards and witches, seemed to have stayed the same.

Fenrir snarled, slashing his clawed hands – or exceptionally badly kept fingernails, from this distance it was hard to say – through the air. “You once secured my services by offering me people to bite. Said you would remove the restrictions the Ministry had put on us! You are an oath-breaker!” That last was almost barked, and then the man lunged forwards, colliding with a shield ward that flared brightly on contact.

Watching with clinical disinterest as the now furious but cowed werewolf was flung back onto the ground, Marvolo finally raised his wand.
leaf-covered forest ground where he cowered and cradled his right arm, Marvolo slowly stood. “I respect you as the leader of your pack, Fenrir. But make no mistake. I made an error trying to reach my goals by resorting to violence. Now that I’m sane once more, I chose another way. I honour my promise to work to get rid of the laws restricting werewolves. I know that’s not what you had in mind, but I feel it is the best course of action. From now on, neither I nor any of mine will support your violent movement. Let this be a warning to you: leave me and mine alone, and we will let you be. Attack us and we will react with equal force.”

Once he had said it he knew it was true. Giving werewolves a way to live in accordance with the law, giving them another prospect besides falling in with a pack leader like Greyback, was the best he could do for their community. The best for their community… was it possible? Hot and cold shivers ran down Marvolo’s back. Was it possible that the vow he had made the day he had adopted Henry, the day he had claimed his birthright as Lord Slytherin, was influencing his decisions?

It would explain a lot. His willingness to help the Headmaster of Hogwarts. The ease with which he had given up information about killed and vanished members of their community. That he was even now planning to risk his own life – or rather his current body – to retrieve the bodies of those he had turned into Inferi and at the same time getting rid of a possible big problem for the future.

He blinked slowly, only now registering that the wolf had used his distracted state of mind to make a run for it. Marvolo sighed. He had delivered his warning, now it was up to Fenrir to act on it. Knowing the man, Marvolo suspected that he would stage an attack of some kind, either trying to slander his name and public face, or attacking someone near to him to make him suffer.

Whatever. In the end, Marvolo had no way to make the man act the way he wanted him to. Not without risking discovery and possible repercussions. It would be many years before he could risk going against the laws in a way that was outside his Death Eaters and his heavily warded headquarters.

Lifting all the spells he had set around the clearing, Marvolo prepared to leave. It was cold, and even with his warming charms, he now longed for a nice cup of sweet tea in front of the fire, a good book at hand.

With a last look around he apparated back to his study in the old house given as a dowry to Dorea Black.

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He had not even found the time to shed his cloak when a big explosion rocked the house. What by all the ghosts of Hogwarts was going on here?

Getting his wand out of its holster, Marvolo rushed out of his office, looking for the source of the riot while feeling for the wards. Had Dumbledore managed to find them? Had they been betrayed?

That thought was quickly forgotten when he heard Bellatrix screech at the top of her lungs. So there had been no breach, only unrest in the ranks. Adapting a more decisive stance – he had taken a more stealthy pose before – Marvolo walked around the corner and onto the scene of a marital disagreement.
Bellatrix stood in a near crouch, wand raised, facing off her husband, a snarl on her face, still surrounded by her wild hair.

“I will not allow you to go after my family’s heiress, Bella. You can screech all you want, but we will not harm the girl!” Rodolphus growled, taking an equally versatile duelling stance.

Tiredly closing his eyes, Marvolo pinched the bridge of his nose. Bella really promised to be a problem. More than once already he had thought about actually giving her up. But every time his thoughts went that way, his stomach would get queasy, his guess was that it had something to do with the Mark he had placed on her.

Casting a quick stunner to the witch, catching her by surprise, dropping her to the ground, Marvolo stepped more into the room, taking all the damage in. “Take your wife to her room, Rodolphus. Make sure she doesn’t get her hands on a wand again.” He dismissed the man, who looked annoyed with his wife as well.

Was there a way to reform her? Or would he be forced to either imprison her himself, or give her up? Even kill her? Abandoning that line of thought, Marvolo walked back to his study, calling for his house-elf to make him a nice cup of chamomile tea. Then the mirror in his pocket started to vibrate. Henry was calling. Their almost daily short chats were really a nice thing he was looking forward to. Accepting the call from his son, Marvolo sat down in his favourite armchair, lighting the fire in the fireplace with a well-aimed incendio.

“Hello, Henry, how was your day?”

Chapter End Notes

Do any of you know of a story in which all genders of the characters are swapped? I know there are quite a few where Harry is female, but is there one that all genders have been reversed? I don’t remember ever coming across one that went quite that far with this trope… I’m curious what that would be like… So, any recommendations? I got a few suggestions over at FFnet (like "The Distaff Side") but I’m curious if you know of more.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published on the 10th of March 2017
Harry sat at his desk up in his room holding the little mirror Marvolo had created for him. The normally reflective surface showed showed Marvolo’s face at the moment. The man had greeted Harry with an almost cheerful, “Hello, Henry. How was your day?”

So Harry started with the most notable news of the day. As their talks over the mirror were usually short, he kept to short tales of lessons and school-related activities. “The Aurors have found enough evidence connected to the attack that four students were suspended and sent home. Cormac McLaggen and two of his Gryffindor friends – Summers and Parker – and one Ravenclaw from his year, Belby. I feel much lighter now. It’s quite silly, isn’t it?” And he did feel kind of silly. They hadn’t done anything dangerous since he had gotten his own room, and maybe even had scared themselves with what they had done. It was unlikely, but as Harry didn’t know for sure, he gave them the benefit of the doubt. Or tried to. McLaggen had been a right ass from the beginning of the year.

“So our suspicions were correct,” an introspective-sounding Marvolo said at the other end.

Harry blinked, feeling the blood drain from his face. Marvolo had known?

“Henry?” now the man sounded concerned and red eyes were searching Harry’s face. “What is wrong?”

Trying to calm his racing heart and to look unconcerned, Harry answered with a little shrug.

“Nothing.”

Harry could almost see the wheels turning behind those red eyes, and wondered when the man who had adopted him and seemed to care had started to be so easy to read.

“Don’t lie, Henry.” The admonishment came almost immediately, but the wizard still sounded distracted. Then his gaze sharpened again. “I did something wrong, didn’t I? But what? Henry, I’m new to this pa… guardian thing, if you don’t tell me what I did wrong, I can’t change it.”

Now Harry was truly puzzled. He couldn’t remember any adult admitting to errors like this. Almost the moment it did happen, and without any excuses. He wanted to stay angry at Marvolo for keeping something from him that did directly concerned him, but he felt his anger slipping away from him.

Despite the dissipating anger, the resentment was clear in his voice as Harry finally answered. “You knew who had attacked me? And you didn’t tell me? Why?”

After a few slow blinks – probably thinking about what Harry had just told him – Marvolo took a few moments before he frowned and made a face. “I acted like Dumbledore.” He mock shuddered.
“I’m sorry, Henry.” He sounded like he meant it, but Harry was still miffed about the fact Marvolo had withheld information as all adults did, or so it felt, at least. “Severus reviewed his memory of the morning when that potion was put into your goblet. He identified a few likely suspects, but it was nothing that would hold up in an investigation. So… I decided to not act on the information,” Marvolo finally explained, still searching Harry’s face through the mirror.

Considering what acting on the information might have entailed – torture was the first to come to mind – Harry was a tad relieved the other had done nothing. But the fact the four had been suspended didn’t mean they would be gone from the school for good. “Well, the Aurors have managed to find something substantial enough. But I’m not sure it will work out.” What he knew of the workings of the Ministry, it was all too likely that at least one would manage to worm his way out of consequences. McLaggen had mentioned, once or twice… that his father was a big number in the Ministry.

“I will make sure that the procedure will be followed closely. Even if I have to bribe someone to get it done.”

This statement made Harry laugh, bracing himself against the edge of his desk. It was too funny – in a sad way – bribing someone to ensure that proper legal procedure was followed.

Abandoning that line of thought – it was not likely to go anywhere – Harry changed the topic. “We had our first lesson with Professor Slinkhard today. He’s not as bad as Umbridge. But it seems like he really has something against practical defence. Hermione thinks we should start a sort of Defence club.” Marvolo allowed the shift in topic and Harry was glad about it. He would have to think a little about the fact that Marvolo had not told him about the suspects Professor Snape had found, so it was better to stop talking about it for the moment.

“A club? Sounds like a reasonable idea. If you need one of the professors to agree to help, I can make sure Professor Snape will hold no objections.”

Shaking his head, Harry started to explain their plan, or rather Hermione’s plan of action.

Just before they would say their goodbye for the day, Marvolo started on another topic. “Quite recently it was brought to my attention, that Fenrir Greyback might try to target you, Henry. He is all for a werewolves-rule kind of society, planning to annihilate all human wizards and witches. Either by infecting or killing them. My approach to integrate those affected by lycanthropy into society is something he can’t condone. As he is known to target the family and friends of those he wants to harm… be careful and warn your friends and allies.”

Harry nodded, more annoyed than surprised that there was another person out there willing to hurt him. “I will warn everyone. Will this limit my ability to go to Hogsmeade?”

“No. But I will stress again that I don’t want you to be wandering the grounds after dark. And never set a foot into the Forbidden Forest if you want to fly on your broom at all next summer.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry answered. He really didn’t fancy a stroll through the Forbidden Forest. Meeting the acromantula back when he had been a second-year had cured him of any desire to go in there on his own, or even with friends. Going in there, knowing that a werewolf might be hunting him, would be utter madness.

After they had ended their call, Harry placed the mirror in the one small drawer in his desk that he had reserved for the two communication devices, and got out the one linked to the mirror in possession of Padfoot.
Flopping down gracelessly on his bed, green eyes stared up to the canopy over the bed. So Marvolo had withheld information that directly related to him. Names of the suspects behind the attacks he had been subjected to. Even if he might have been able to deduce the names by himself – McLaggen had been rather hostile, and his friends always did what he did – but that was not the point.

Marvolo had done something wrong.

Not counting everything the man had done while he still had been Voldemort. If Harry started to count that, he would be back where he had been at the start of the summer holidays. Doubting everything, being miserable and constantly confused.

Not a state of mind Harry appreciated. Neither of them could change the past. But it had looked like Marvolo tried to make a better future.

Well, he had realized he had made an error, and asked Harry for help to understand what he had done wrong. And then he had shared information again. It might have been something Harry needed to know for his safety. But Marvolo could simply have said stay indoors as the grown-ups had done when they had thought Sirius Black had broken out of Azkaban to hunt down Harry.

Rubbing his hand across his brow, Harry frowned. It really was complicated. But as Mrs. Goyle liked to point out, humans were not perfect. Everyone was bound to make errors. The important thing was how they acted when they realized they had made an error.

All in all, Harry thought Marvolo had reacted okay. There were no other words he could think of to describe his thoughts on this. He probably would have to wait and see how Marvolo’s information sharing would develop. This had been the first slip-up Harry knew of… and there he stopped himself. He would not descend into that pitfall.

Sitting back up, Harry grabbed the mirror Sirius had given him, scooting back to sit against the headboard. Speaking with his godfather certainly would cheer him up.

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“I don’t think this is a good idea, Marvolo,” Xerxes said from his seat by the fire, sipping from his tea, watching as his friend and Lord prepared himself for the day’s plans.

“Which part exactly, Xerxes?” was the amused question asked in return. The Dark-Lord-in-hiding grabbed a vest of enchanted leather and slipped it on over his sturdy but elegant linen shirt.

“Oh, I’m not sure,” Xerxes drawled, amused despite himself. “The fact you will show a place created entirely by dark magic – by your hand! -- to the Auror Department. Or maybe that you plan to eliminate an army of Inferi? If you would stop at destroying them?! But no! You have to recover the bodies! I never would have thought that Lord Slytherin would someday take unnecessary risks.” And he really had problems comprehending why his Lord was undertaking this endeavour. It was overly risky. The Aurors might find something that would break the story their Lord was telling, exposing his duplicity and deceit to the public. Additionally, there was the real risk of bodily harm, destroying Inferi was hard enough, but to reclaim the bodies? It felt like utter madness.

The grey-haired wizard was taken by surprise when his younger-looking friend just chuckled at
this, slipping into a relatively short, formfitting leather robe. “Well, it gave me the ability to retrieve something I left behind at the ancestral home of the Black family in London. It will garner some goodwill with the Ministry and the broader public. So I would say it is a pretty decent move to solidify my stand within society.” Finished with closing the silver buckles on his robes, Marvolo straightened and threw a smirk in his friend’s direction. “That I get to practice Dark magic in front of Ministry personnel and they will thank me for it, just adds this little edge to the whole situation. You know?”

Oh yes, Xerxes could see the appeal to this scenario. And it was perfectly fitting for Marvolo to use this to fulfil his own desire to rub his skill and knowledge into the faces of the light wizards, while still maintaining the image of perfect, nice and friendly Lord Slytherin.

“Just be careful, Marvolo.” What else could Xerxes say? His Lord would do as he wished, nothing an old school friend – Xerxes still wasn’t sure if Marvolo had had any true friends as a child – could say would deter him from it.

“I will be.” A much more solemn looking Marvolo turned to look at Xerxes, finally attired befitting the planned activities for the day. “I already have taken a few precautions. Don’t fear if this body should come to harm. Most of the precautions that kept me from dying back then are still in place. But be prepared to take over duties as Regent for Henry and the Slytherin Lordship. I will certainly return if this body is killed, but I will endeavour to avoid the need for such an action.” Xerxes was inclined to believe his Lord but didn’t manage to say anything as he still tried to process the announcement so casually made just moments before.

The Dark Lord gave his follower a knowing smirk. “It is likely that Lord Black will gain custody should I once again vanish. Should this happen, I will contact you as soon as possible. There are instructions in my desk in the study at Headquarters. I trust you will only search for it if it proves necessary.” Still dumbfounded, Xerxes nodded in confirmation, his unbound hair swinging with the motion.

An old clock chimed somewhere in the house. “I should leave now or I will be late,” the younger of them said, picking up a small satchel from the chair it had been resting on, moving to leave the dressing room they had occupied at Lestrange Manor.

Xerxes hurried to stand and follow, to show his Lord out as was proper by all standards of society. He really hoped that there would be no need for him to go looking for those instructions. Even if he now was curious beyond believe over what those instructions might contain.

They all had speculated about what means had been used to return their Lord to them. It never had been spelled out what the ritual had been or how he had even stayed in this plane when his body had been destroyed. Pettigrew had been handed over to the Ministry relatively quickly, and to approach Snape for what he might know, because of his involvement with returning their Lord to a human body, was useless. If there ever had been a man able to keep a secret, it was Severus Snape. Xerxes still remembered the thin youth the man once had been. Who would have ever thought he would become such an exceptional Potions Master? This only went to prove that there was no telling what a person could accomplish by taking a look at their parents and upbringing.

After his Lord had vanished with a flash of green flames, Xerxes made his way to his study. There was paperwork to tackle. Custody of a few children to transfer, appointments with the Goblins to negotiate. They seemed to be unsure how to react to the sudden increase in demand for ancestry tests. The newly appointed Headmaster wondered if they were stalling because the potion needed to prepare the parchment was time-consuming to brew… or maybe the goblin parts used were not readily available… something like goblin hearts certainly would limit their willingness to brew
more of it on short notice.

Banishing these thoughts, Xerxes sat down behind his desk, asked the elves for some tea, and started to work.

ooOoo

Marvolo stepped out of the Floo directly into the Auror office. He had been allowed to use it this one time, and was glad he hadn’t had to walk all the way from the entrance up to here.

His first look fell on the group already assembled and waiting for him. Bill Weasley was there, as were Madame Bones, Rufus Scrimgeour, and a few more Aurors. Marvolo was curious if they all intended to accompany him, or if they just had come to see them off. There was another curse-breaker clad in reinforced protective clothing – as was Bill Weasley – and two Unspeakables in their distinctive robes. The lively conversations came to a halt as soon as his presence was noticed.

“It looks like I’m the last one. I’m not late, am I?” Marvolo asked, looking from one to the other, checking who was there and what the mood was in the group. It seemed to be mostly good, the atmosphere sated with curiosity.

“You aren’t late, Lord Slytherin,” Scrimgeour said, his expression sour. “The others were already here to begin with. There have been a few changes to the expedition team at the last moment, and you need to provide a way to get us all to the place we want to rid of dark magic.”

Marvolo didn’t try to keep his brow down at that. Up till now the man hadn’t given the impression that he had any big reservations about Marvolo and his actions after he had been declared a new person. It always had seemed like the man was a stickler for the rules… and had aspirations for higher positions. Maybe the wizard saw the change Marvolo had brought to the Ministry challenging his possible avenues to higher ranks.

“I could apparate someone licensed to create portkeys by side-along apparation to near the place. It would take a little time, but this way a portkey could be created to take the members of the expedition to the site quickly. It would be faster than apparating each one separately.” Marvolo suggested, fully aware that there was a bunch of bureaucratic regulations around the creation of portkeys. He had wanted to plan for a little longer to sort all these little problems out before they actually went to clear out all the Inferi. But the Auror Department had pushed the matter.

“You clearly know the place we would travel to. And I’m fairly sure that you know how to create a portkey yourself, Lord Slytherin,” the taller of the two Unspeakables stated in a slightly sarcastic tone, not asking outright why they should go to all the trouble when there was a much faster and easier method to reach their goal.

Suppressing a smirk, instead aiming for a modest expression, Marvolo nodded in confirmation. “I certainly possess the knowledge to create portkeys, but I don’t have the license needed. Nor have I memories of passing the necessary steps and exams to get one.” Back before his first body had been destroyed, he never had bothered with getting such licenses. Why should he have? The licenses were mostly a way to make money – as they were really costly – and were used as a way to restrict and monitor magic deemed too dangerous or too easily abused to be freely accessible to the public.
But considering what could happen if a portkey transported its passengers into something solid or deposited them a hundred meters above ground... it really was common sense to only use portkeys created by those who knew what they were doing. Not that a Ministry license was all that much reassurance. More than once there had been instances of examiners taking bribes to grant licences to someone not making reliable portkeys.

Marvolo certainly preferred to use those he had created himself.

Madame Bones snorted and shook her head. “Yes, yes... we all see that you are trying to follow the law this time around, Lord Slytherin.” There was a chuckle from somewhere in the group. Marvolo thought it might have been one of the Unspeakables. “But we will not get to the cave if we try to follow the protocol too closely. So, is everyone comfortable with taking a portkey created by Lord Slytherin?” she asked of those present and got more or less neutral nods as an answer. “Go ahead, Lord Slytherin, I accept your offer to help us get this endeavour on the road and finished in a reasonable time.”

Giving a shallow bow, Marvolo had to concede that Madame Bones knew how to make the convoluted Ministry move to reach a goal. “If someone could provide me with a length of rope I would be happy to comply with this request.”

In short order the required length of rope was provided and glowed in the deep blue indicating the spell had worked and created a portkey. All members of the expedition took hold of the rope and Marvolo activated the portkey, whirling them all away towards the coast and their destination.

ooOoo

They all landed – more or less gracefully – on an empty stretch of land with a nice few of the sea. Wind was blowing, smelling of salt, fish, and algae, the cries of seagulls filling the air. Bill looked around, wondering where there could be a cave around here.

When the last of the wizards – there wasn’t a single witch in their team, as Madame Bones had declared herself too old to take part in such a dangerous plan – had got back to his feet they started to follow Lord Slytherin over the short grass blown every which way by the stiff breeze. As his robes were designed to protect him from dangerous magic and not the effects of the elements, Bill was glad when they came to a narrow ghyll* with a steep catwalk at the side, giving them shelter from the cold biting wind.

Following one after the other, they descended until they came to a small platform almost at sea level, frequently set under water by the incoming waves.

“We can swim through this opening, or conjure a boat to row... maybe that would be difficult, we are a rather large group,” Lord Slytherin said pointing at a small hole in the cliff, almost invisible due to the rough waves constantly crashing against the stone. “Or we could walk along the edge, if you give me a little time to dispel the protections placed so the walkway can’t be discovered.”

They all opted to wait a moment, getting wet feet – only in a few cases probably; both he and his colleague had cast an impermeable charm at their boots in anticipation of all the water they would encounter – was preferable to having to swim in this weather.

Bill watched, concentrating on every move Lord Slytherin made, assessing the man’s skill with
what he was doing. When he had watched him counter the curse on the Headmaster’s hand, he had
gotten the feeling that the wizard had a vast well of knowledge at his disposal, and what he was
seeing now only confirmed this. He was really curious what they would get to see once they were
inside this cave they had been briefed about.

The trip along the wall felt longer than it was. The spray constantly threatened to soak them, while
the wind tried to sweep them into the sea. They all took a moment to catch their breath once they
reached the inside of the cave – or more likely an antechamber, as there was no lake in sight –
casting drying and warming charms on their clothes once Lord Slytherin had confirmed that there
was nothing dangerous they could trigger here with casting magic of any kind.

“The cave is behind this wall.” Lord Slytherin said, gesturing at a wall looking no different than
the others. The Aurors stepped back letting Bill and the other curse-breaker step up and check the
wall. In short time they had spotted the rather crude spell on it, hiding a doorway that would
activate once some blood of a human was smeared on it.

“Not a really complicated or sophisticated protection,” sneered the older curse-breaker, whom Bill
had never really liked. The man tended to make crude jokes and belittle the apprentices, not a trait
he liked in someone he had to work with. But this had been a volunteers-only mission, and beside
them, there had been no others crazy enough to volunteer.

“Well,” Lord Slytherin drawled, “no one ever said paranoia added to any aesthetic sense. I think
the location alone is not easy to find or access.” He got out a small dagger which he used to make a
small cut on his left palm, pressing his hand and the blood on it to the wall.

Without further comment the wizard with the shady past stepped through the opening archway into
the cave beyond. The others followed, getting out their wands in preparation for what lay hidden
here.

There was no real lighting, only a low green glow from somewhere in the middle of a fairly big,
dark lake.

“Don’t step in the water. Be aware that there is no way for a witch or wizard to apparate in this
place, nor to use a portkey to leave. If you should reach the centre of the lake, there is a small
island there. Should the basin on this island still have some potion in it, don’t drink it! It will make
you suffer and forget every safety measure you might normally take. Just leave it be. Any other
questions?” Lord Slytherin’s instructions were curt, spoken with some force and a chill in his voice
that made it clear he was not happy.

Bill looked over the lake and wondered how many Inferi there were, and how many more could
find a place under the surface as smooth as glass. When he cast the standard detection spell for
Inferi – he had had to look that one up in preparation for this trip – his mouth fell open and he only
dimly registered the shocked exclamations from the others. There was no need to speculate how
many Inferi might fit into the lake before it was full. It was already filled to its maximum capacity.

Now the grim look on Lord Slytherin’s face took on a whole new meaning. Bill looked at the man
in his expensive protective clothing and wondered how it must be to know that he had done this.
That he had killed this many people and trapped them here as animated dead bodies, forced to do
his bidding, leaving many families not knowing what had become of their loved ones.

With few words they coordinated their plan on how to go about this mission and started to set up
their equipment.

Time to get these bodies out of here.
Watching the Unspeakables getting some body bags out of their charmed satchel to store and transport the bodies, Marvolo scowled to mask his anticipation for the spells he would have to cast soon. There were a great many bodies in that lake, and they probably would have to come here more than once to clear the entire lake. A little bemused, Marvolo pondered about how the quest to get one body back for a bargain with Black had turned into dismantling the entire trap he had built here. But considering his fairly recent revelation, it might not be so unexplainable. If the Muggles were to find this place, magic and their whole society would be at risk of discovery. And what he had read about the past, together with his own experiences, had him convinced that it was truly in their best interest to stay hidden.

Funny how such a seemingly inconsequential oath could influence one’s behaviour. But as long as this nudging towards actions benefiting the community was compatible with his own goals, it was not something he would fight against. Not that he was optimistic that fighting the compulsion was even possible. With some luck, the best for the community, in his opinion, would continue to align with his plans. Besides having planned to reach a position of power, he had always wanted to improve their society to something better... based on his outlook, of course.

“Lord Slytherin,” the taller of the Unspeakables spoke to gain his attention, “we have prepared everything and now will require your assistance.”

Getting his almost white wand out of its holster, Marvolo stepped to the lake shore, preparing for the spell to call forth the Inferi one after the other. Now the amusing part of the day was about to start. He would call the Inferi with a spell classified as dark, passing them over to the curse breakers to subdue only for the Unspeakables to identify and store the bodies.

The Aurors were there to observe and guard their backs. Marvolo was unhappy that he had not managed to get at least one of his own Aurors on this mission, but Scrimgeour had insisted on attending himself and had brought his own hand-picked Auror, one who was neither part of the Order – as far as he knew – nor one of his.

The next hour passed in a steady stream of magic cast by them all. Marvolo held his spell at a steady pace, timing it that the others had enough time to do their part before the next Inferius stepped up to them. All the faces he could see when one of the others occasionally came into his line of sight were grim. From time to time, one of the Unspeakables would call out the name of a person they could identify, and Marvolo felt a little bit lighter – even as he was quite exhilarated with the liberal use of powerful magic – as the name of Regulus Black was called. So the original reason to do all this was fulfilled. Lord Black would be able to bury his brother.

After they had retrieved around fifty bodies one of the Unspeakables called for a break. Marvolo used the moment to stretch his legs a little and check the work of the others. It would be really unfortunate if one of the Inferi were to get out of its bag and run around the Ministry. It might be amusing to imagine, but it would be counterproductive.

As he was sauntering over to the edge of the lake, along the line of Inferi stored in dark blue bags, the sound of ripping fabric made him spin in place. He saw one of the Inferi manage to get out of its temporary prison, extending its claw-like hands towards the red-headed wizard standing near the place, his back turned, his wand waving through the pattern of a general detection and examination charm. Without really thinking about his actions, Marvolo propelled himself into the
air with the spell for unsupported flight he had developed once for intimidation purposes. Several yells alerted the Weasley man to the dangerous situation he was in, making him turn the moment before Marvolo managed to reach him and shove him out of the way of danger, grabbing the Inferius while flying by. Marvolo had a vague plan of dropping the Inferius into the lake and making his way back to the shore, but he had forgotten about an important part of his protections. It was impossible to cross the lake by any other means than the boat he had provided to do so. An attempt to fly over the lake by broom, for instance, would end just as his own flying ended, by falling into the lake.

While the claws of the dead body he held with one hand left deep gashes on his arms after they had shredded his robes and the shirt, Marvolo contemplated that he was lucky he still was relatively near to the others, and glad that he had left Xerxes with clear instructions.

Then he came into contact with the water’s surface – as hard as any floor falling from this height and with that much force – getting the wind knocked out of him, submerging and instantly assaulted by the dead waiting under the water to do exactly this.

Fighting to remain calm, to cast the needed spells to control them without his wand in hand and without uttering a word, Marvolo felt more and more claws break through his clothes, opening wounds, making him bleed.

He felt his strength leaving him as his body started to demand air, but he was held down and dragged deeper by the undead he himself had created. Oh, the irony. Totally disorientated, Marvolo finally lost consciousness, sinking deeper into the water.


Minerva hurried to keep up with her student as he almost raced through the corridors of St. Mungo’s. She frowned, not about the young man so eager to meet his guardian, but about Albus. She was fairly certain that her old friend would have sent almost every Gryffindor to see an injured parent without a moment’s hesitation. But in this instance, he had almost seemed determined to keep the boy from the hospital whatever the cost.

Now that she finally had managed to force the Headmaster to follow his own rules and policies – family always had been important to him – she was accompanying Mr. Slytherin to visit his adoptive parent in hospital.

She was unsure what she should feel about the apparent relationship developing between the man that had been You-Know-Who and the son of two of her favourite students. Was she happy that Harry had found family? Or should she be worried that the dark wizard would influence the still so innocent boy onto a dangerous path?

She decided that it was not at all important what she thought the moment she managed to catch up to the boy in the private room the receptionist had sent them to. Harry was hanging over the bed, his arms wrapped around the man lying in it and looking bewildered, looking as if he were hanging on for dear life.

Who was she to judge what was right and wrong here?
Harry didn’t care one bit what others might think about him. What they might think about Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived, hugging Lord Slytherin. He didn’t even care what he would feel later. Probably guilt for fearing for the safety of his parents’ murderer. The man still plotting to gain power, going against the Ministry, hiding escapees, still torturing and killing.

Earlier today during a lecture, Harry had suddenly felt intense panic and fear, only for these emotions to be cut off suddenly. Until Professor McGonagall had come to inform him that his guardian had been injured during a task he had undertaken for the Auror Office and was in St. Mungo's, Harry had felt like he was sitting in a heated cauldron. He was unable to sit still or concentrate on anything. He had known that Marvolo had planned to go to the cave and get rid of all the Inferi lying in wait there. The older wizard had been certain he would be able to handle everything that might happen there, and Harry had been inclined to believe him. Clutching the man in his arms even harder, Harry now knew how foolish that had been. There never was a way to be certain.

“Ouch, Henry, please, you are squeezing too hard,” the strangled voice of the wizard Harry had been so worried about said, patting the teen's back awkwardly with one of his heavily bandaged hands.

Dropping his arms instantly, Harry stepped back, looking a little sheepish. “Sorry, sir,” he mumbled letting his green gaze wander over the other’s body. His arms and hands were bandaged, and Harry could see a bandage peeking out under the only half closed sleeping shirt Marvolo was wearing. The wizard was overly pale as well, almost as pale as Professor Snape usually was.

“It’s alright, Henry,” Marvolo said with a small smile in his eyes. :A hug like that is nicer than I had thought it would be:. Harry’s eyes widened in surprise. Sure, he had known that Marvolo hadn’t had a happy childhood, and that he had no real friends or family after that. But he never had made the connection that the wizard had never been hugged before.

“Are you terribly hurt, sir?” Harry really wanted to know how bad it was. He was disturbed to know that he seemed to care, to really care, about Marvolo Slytherin, the man that had been Voldemort until he had decided to no longer use the name. He knew what he would like to speak about at his next appointment with Mrs. Goyle.

“Nothing that will not heal with time,” Marvolo dismissed the question, but flinched as he waved his hand. “In fact, the healers here have agreed to let me go home as long as I have a competent healer there to care for me. I already contacted Healer Greengrass, who will be up to the task, I’m sure.”

“That’s good.” At least it sounded like it was something good. “But what did happened, sir?” Marvolo patted the bed at his side, inviting Harry to sit down – again startling the teenager with such a normal action – before he started to tell what had happened to bring him to this state.

Neither wizard noticed the Transfiguration Professor leaving the room, closing the door softly behind her.
Minerva stared at the wall opposite the door she just had closed. Deep in thought, she didn’t notice the oldest Weasley boy walking up to her and almost jumped out of her boots as he addressed her. “Professor McGonagall! You brought Harry to see Lord Slytherin?”

Holding her left hand to her heart, Minerva nodded, catching her breath. “I did, Mr. Weasley. And I will take him back to school after he has talked to his guardian.” She was not about to explain more than that. It would be highly unprofessional.

She was a little startled to see the solemn nod from the former Head Boy. “That’s just as well, I suppose. He can use the distraction of being with his friends after such a shock, I’m sure. Never would have thought that Lord Slytherin would risk his own skin to save anyone.”

“So that’s what happened?” Minerva couldn’t stop herself from asking, still sounding professional and not like one of those gossiping witches or wizards always after the latest scandal in one of the old families. She was curious what exactly had happened, and was sure that no report she could probably later read in the Prophet would get near the truth.

“Yeah, he got me out of a tight spot. Do you know what we were doing today?” Minerva negated this with a small shake of her head, prompting the younger wizard to tell her the whole story with big gestures and excited words.

By the time Minerva had brought Mr. Slytherin back to the Gryffindor common room, she was certain that Albus had lost his grasp on reality concerning everything connected to Lord Slytherin. She would have to see if other areas of his duties were affected by this. If he was going senile, she had to make sure no students would come to harm.

And there he was. Again surrounded by his adoring fans. But he wasn’t a proper Gryffindor. Adopted by You-Know-Who, speaking with snakes. The real and the human ones. If he were a proper Gryffindor, he would have run away. Would have stopped speaking with snakes, those with legs and those without.

But no. He kept his dark ways, and also made sure his friend got on the team and not Cormac. Who certainly was a much better flyer than this Weasley. She glanced up from her book of simple prank spells she tried to read, looking over to the group of fifth-years sitting around Slytherin – she always said it with disgust, even in her head – listening to his story of some supposedly epic adventure some people had had today.

If she only could manage to make him slip in his acting. Then everyone would see him for the slimy snake he truly was, and her Cormac could come back to school to be with her.

Idly flipping a few pages, she came across one spell and its big flashing warning box. Well, this one had potential. If she set it up at the right time, she was likely to get her target.

She kept on plotting while Harry, the most deceptive student in the whole of Hogwarts, acted for the stupid so they would keep following him.

This would not go on much longer, because she had a plan.
Dilys watched sadly from her canvas as the current Headmaster of Hogwarts paced around the office, muttering to himself. She remembered like it had been yesterday when the young man had come to this office for the first time. He had been made Head Boy and was getting instructions from the Headmaster of the time. He had been such an eager teenager, eager to learn all magic he could, eager to prove himself. Dilys had always thought he was a tad hostile towards Muggles, but it was not an uncommon sentiment then, and he didn’t seem like a person inclined towards violence.

Of course they – the community of former Headmasters and Headmistresses from the time the magical portrait had been invented onwards – had heard of him before. Professors had been in the office talking about the bright student Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, debating if they should offer him additional tutoring, or let him skip a year.

There were many rumours the portraits overheard during the day and discussed once all the humans had gone to sleep. They had formed a habit of betting on possible outcomes of the lives of the students they got to see and hear more of. And they almost all had agreed that Mr. Dumbledore probably would become Minister of Magic one day.

Looking back, it was obvious that they had been oblivious to much that was going on in the boy’s life.

The Sorting Hat had a habit of telling them all about the first-years he had sorted. So they all knew that the younger brother of Albus Dumbledore – Aberforth – had come to Hogwarts as well. But they never heard of him beside that. He was an average student, like most of the children. As they were hooked up to the school in a way she didn’t comprehend, they all knew the names of all children eligible to attend Hogwarts the moment they were born somewhere on the British islands, even if they were unable to talk about them if not directly asked about one of them.

So they knew there had been a girl by the name of Dumbledore who should have come to the school, but never did.

When Albus returned as the teacher for Transfiguration, he had lost most of the brightness so evident in the younger man he had been. The discussion a few years later when the Headmaster had wanted him to become Head of House for Gryffindor led to a long discussion later in the night over what had happened to make the young man so weary of positions of power, when he had been so eager for influence shortly before graduation.

The Albus Dumbledore of the present had sat down in his chair, sipping on a cup of tea, looking tired and weary. They all had witnessed how the man had been scheming and plotting, and watched all his plans crumbling under his hands. If she didn’t know the reasons for his struggles, she might have been tempted to think him an evil man.

At first they had got to see a pleasant teacher with a penchant for those students a little laid back, not striving for powerful positions, but following their dreams of travelling the world, playing Quidditch, and getting involved in Arts.

They had seen him struggling to avoid positions of power, long discussions until he consented to become Deputy Headmaster under Dippet.
Then Tom Riddle had come to the school, setting the Sorting Hat to reminiscing over times long past now that a descendant of Slytherin had found his way into the school. The enchanted nuisance – he tended to rub it in their faces that he was older than all of them – had met descendants from almost all the founders’ families over time, bemoaning that he was forbidden to share what he found in their heads with the children, and therefore was forced to let the lines be hidden for so very long.

The fact Albus Dumbledore resented those that sought out power was becoming clearer and clearer with time. That he suspected the young boy Mr. Riddle of evil was clear. Sadly the Headmaster, Dippet, never asked them about what they knew about those attacks, or why some students always came to ask if they could stay. It was not only Tom Riddle who didn’t want to return to the Muggle world during a war.

Dilys wished she could tell Albus that his struggle with power was not shared by all. That seeking out influence was not a mark of evil like he seemed to believe. Not everyone sought power to do bad things.

It had been one night after Albus had become Headmaster – the fifth or so anniversary of the famous duel between Albus and the wizard named Grindelwald – that they finally learned the background of all those seemingly random actions to keep power out of the hands of those reaching for it the most.

They had learned of Ariana, the girl who had never made it to Hogwarts, Gellert Grindelwald and a summer romance, the guilt convincing that brilliant young man that he could not be trusted with power, that there rarely ever was one who could wield it and do good.

The sudden change from academical interest in all fields of magic as a student to banishing all that could be deemed dangerous and was named dark in current times as a professor… The death of his little sister over a disagreement between brothers over a lover and the grand plans of two young men… it did explain the automatic suspicion Albus had held for those using power consciously, and his favouritism towards those that didn’t seem to hold any regard for their social rules, boundaries, and structures, or lost themselves in topics never leading to political influence.

It looked like Albus was finally on his way to losing everything because he refused to acknowledge that it was possible for there to be something other than love between parents, or guardians, and the children in their care. Sending Tom Riddle back into a war-ridden city into the care of an alcoholic woman had been an error, sending Severus Snape back into a house with a drunkard father, doing nothing to curtail his favourite group of careless bullies from tormenting a boy their age, sending Harry Potter back to Muggles afraid of magic… Maybe he was finally losing his grip on reality.

Their various attempts to make him see, to make him realize that he pushed those sorted into Slytherin into their actions against him because they saw no other way, had not worked. And they were unable to tell him about their knowledge, bound to never tell what they learned about the students to anyone. Only the Headmaster could get some of the information, should he ever ask. But Albus never had done, and probably never would. He sent them to spy and send word, never asking for their advice or further knowledge. In fact he seemed rather miffed every time one of them offered advice out of their own volition.

“Oh, Albus. I wish you would talk with someone about your troubles.” She feared it was already too late, she could only hope he would not cause any more damage until he was removed from his position.
When the floo in the staff room at Hogwarts had flared, Severus had listened with mounting horror to the short message the Auror had relayed to the Head of Gryffindor because the guardian of a Gryffindor student had been almost fatally injured and the boy should get the opportunity to visit with the man.

Severus had not known what his Lord had had planned for that day, but as soon as Minerva was gone and their meeting postponed, Severus went to his quarters to ask Lucius about this, or inform him as the case might be.

Now that he knew his Lord would be fine in just a few days' time, Severus had continued with his plans he had made days before. So now he was standing in a small, tastefully decorated jeweller's shop/workshop combination, inspecting various rings.

The bell over the door chimed a silly little melody as the door opened to admit another customer. “Call for me when you've found what you're looking for, Master Snape,” the jeweller said, turning to go over to the door, pleasantly greeting the newly arrived patron.

Glad that the hovering presence was gone, Severus concentrated on the different bands of metal in the small tray of black velvet.

To reduce the mass of rings he had to choose from – Lucius' recommendation about the large variety to choose from here had been accurate – Severus had named his most important criterion to the artisan: a smooth surface. So there were no flashy stones protruding from the rings, or intricate designs that could catch on anything. But there still were too many different ones. Gold, silver, platinum, electrum, iron, copper, rose-gold… with and without small gems embedded… alone or combined… He would have to add a few criteria to narrow down the possibilities further.

Sonja worked with potions ingredients, would likely work alongside him once they were married, and if she didn't want to have to take the ring off every day – as he guessed would be the case – the material was as important as the practical form. So silver was out, as were all gold variants. To soft for constant wear, and used in potions because of their properties. Sorting the rings to exclude all those containing silver and/or gold, Severus contemplated the different metals there were and which of those were not used in any potions, or at least not any of the common ones.

Titanium. Yes, titanium should work just fine. There were several titanium rings on the tray, some even treated in such a way that they displayed a different colour than the silver sheen most of them had. One in particular caught Severus’ attention. It seemed like several strands of metal had been woven around each other, taking on the appearance of vines or roots winding around each other, two small diamonds had been set into the vines, twinkling up at him. And still the surface was smooth as glass, the visible structure was not evident to his touch, and there was no magic inside the ring.

It was beautiful, practical for someone working with potions, and something unusual. He had found the ring he would get for his Sonja.

“I have found what I have been searching for,” the Potions Master called out to the owner of the shop, moving his chosen ring off to the side, before he looked up over to where the man was standing.

As soon as he saw the other customer, Severus started to swear in his head. Doge was standing...
there with an old dented pocket watch in his hand – probably to get it repaired – and looked shocked to see Severus Snape there buying a ring too small to fit on Severus’ own hand.

So he clearly was buying the ring for someone else. And jewellery this expensive was not something one would get for just anyone. Hastily finishing his purchase, Severus left the shop as fast as he could manage. He probably should give the ring to Sonja this evening and ask her if she was willing to be openly associated with him from now on. If she was not, he would have to find something to tell the Headmaster. If she was, on the other hand… he would be only too happy to tell the old meddler that he had found a woman he loved, a woman he would marry and have a family with. That probably would send the old Headmaster into confusion, after all, he was still convinced that Severus was so burdened down with guilt that he could not see himself in a relationship with anyone. That had been accurate a few months ago, but no longer.

With a smirk Severus walked down the street, his robes billowing behind him, searching for a place he could apparate from so he could visit with Sonja and her father, before Doge had time to go to the Headmaster and inform him of what he had seen this evening.

Chapter End Notes

A few people commented that I was slipping into the “trap” of bashing Dumbledore. And I realized that not one of the regular characters was in a position to let you know what is behind Dumbledore’s actions. It was clear as day in my head, but never made it into the story, because no one had the needed insight. I hope the solution I found worked out well :)

And I promise to get into Marvolo’s and Harry’s reactions to that scene at the hospital in the next chapter. It will require space to do so properly ;)

Maybe I should work on writing action scenes… that part was rather hard to write. I need practice.

* Gill or Ghyll is a ravine or narrow valley in the North of England and other parts of the United Kingdom. The word originates from the Old Norse “Gil,” according to Wikipedia. I had to search for a word describing a steep and narrow cut into the landscape. I think this one fits rather well, but it seems to not be a common word, so Jodre and Jake recommended that I provide an explanation.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
And for farawisa's help in keeping the facts straight. The story is getting big :D

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Denial

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

He had died. Or he would have, if he had had no horcrux tying him – or rather his soul – to the mortal plane. After drowning – not at all a pleasant way to die – he found himself floating without a body again. And even now looking back on what he had seen, he was unsure of why this all had happened. Unsure why he had risked so much without a moment of hesitation or thought, and unsure why the others had risked so much in return to rescue him.

Because while he floated near the water and the shore, he watched six wizards work together to retrieve his body. Someone had conjured or transfigured walls of some kind, enclosing a stretch of the lake slowly being emptied of water by some clever spellwork of one of the Unspeakables. The Aurors had been using fire spells and charms – Marvolo hadn’t been able to make out which specifically – to keep the Inferi at bay, allowing the two curse-breakers to wade through the water searching for the body that had been dragged under by the undead.

Through the haze Marvolo had watched as Weasley and the other one had found his badly mangled body and had carried it to the shore. Luckily he had remembered the one account he had read, detailing the mechanics of returning to the body if it wasn’t destroyed upon the death that severed the connection between body and soul. So he hovered near, keeping close watch so he could return into the body once he would not instantly be expelled again.

He had watched as the Head Auror used basic battlefield healing charms to stem the bleeding and vanish the water from his lungs. As they started to use a spell used to restart a heart, Marvolo used his experience with possessing small animals – he never would have thought he would have to do this again – to return to his own body.

He had felt the pain from all the wounds on his arms, torso, and legs, and gasped for breath, only to pass out a moment later.

When he had regained consciousness the next time, he had been in a brightly lit room surrounded by people he didn’t know. Some female-sounding voice had tried to calm him down. A potion had been pressed to his mouth and he had drunk, much too confused and out of it to do anything else.

When he finally had woken again, he had been in the room he now still was in. Yesterday evening the healers had insisted that he stay the night for observation. As Malcolm had agreed, Marvolo had to surrender to their demands. The only concession he could get out of those demanding he rest and take his potions was that someone of his choosing would guard his door.

Before he could spend more time trying to analyse the happenings of the day before – he needed to know why he had just jumped to help someone not connected to him – or eat more of his breakfast sitting on the tray over his lap, there was a knock at the door.

“Come in!” Marvolo called out, settling back into the small mound of fluffy white pillows a medwitch had stuffed there so he could eat his breakfast.

Crabbe senior opened the door and looked in without entering the room. “There is a Mr. Bill Weasley come to visit you, Lord Slytherin,” the wizard announced. It was fortunate that the man worked regularly as a guard, as it was not at all odd for Marvolo to hire him to guard him here in the hospital.
“Let him in,” the Dark Lord ordered, giving up on his porridge that was cold by now anyway. He had no real appetite, as his wand was missing and he still felt uneasy about his actions. He wasn’t used to acting without a plan or risking himself to help another.

The last time he had been in any mortal danger, he had been on his own. And when he had sent his people on missions, he hadn’t been there to come upon a situation where he might have had to offer help of any kind.

“Lord Slytherin, it is good to see you awake,” William Weasley said as the door to the small private room was closed behind him. The red-headed wizard seemed nervous, and his robes looked like they had been stored in a wardrobe for some time and only were taken out for special occasions.

“It is good to be awake,” Marvolo answered, shifting his weight a little as the last pain potion he had taken started to fade. “It seems like my attempt at a rescue was partially successful.”

“Partially?” Blue eyes looked a little bewildered at the wizard in the bed.

“Well, if I had been truly successful, I wouldn’t have almost died.” That entirely dryly delivered statement startled a small nervous chuckle out of the curse-breaker.

“Well, I came here to thank you for preventing that Inferius from attacking me, and to return this to you.” A slender wand from a light wood was drawn from one of the robe pockets. “I found it on the ground near the lake and thought you would want it back.”

With a slightly trembling hand, unable to prevent this show of weakness in his current state of health, Marvolo accepted his wand back, feeling a large boulder falling from his heart as the warmth of his wand returned to him travelled up his arm.

If he were superstitious, he would have thought his wand would always return to him, whatever would happen. But of course that was silly. That Pettigrew had been the first on the scene and had taken the wand away with him that night back in ‘81 had been pure luck. He would have to be a lot more cautious to avoid tempting that luck any further in the future.

“You are the first of the expedition team I have seen since yesterday. Can you tell me what happened after I plunged into the lake?” Of course he had seen most of the retrieval of his body, but he didn’t see what happened after that, and as he could not risk evoking any suspicions, there was no way but to ask.

And so Bill Weasley started to tell what they had done to battle the Inferi, destroying over three dozen of them in the process, locating Marvolo and stabilizing him. “The two Unspeakables were sceptical that you would remain stable, Lord Slytherin, while we transported you out of the cave. It is quite the journey, after all. But Auror Scrimgeour thought to try something, because you only warned us that humans were unable to apparate. He was able to call his house-elf and got you to St. Mungo's pretty quickly,” the young wizard concluded his report.

“It seems it was to my advantage that the wizard placing the wards around the cave was ignorant about the abilities of other magical beings.” Marvolo huffed and carefully encased his wand in one heavily bandaged hand, tucking it in near his body. He wondered why Regulus had not instructed his elf to take him back as well. Maybe he had not thought his plan all the way through, or he had feared that the elf would not be able to get them both out of the trap. Either way, if he hadn’t made that grievous error back then, he would not have survived the last day. Or maybe it wouldn’t have been necessary at all, because the locket wouldn’t have been stolen… Slowly blinking, Marvolo resurfaced from his thoughts, looking at an uneasily shifting red-headed wizard, decidedly pale.
under his freckles. With a deep breath Marvolo gave the man who had helped to retrieve his body a shaky smile. “It seems that the healers are right to caution me to take it easy for a while. Thank you for returning my wand. And thanks for helping in my rescue, Mr. Weasley. I’m sure we will see each other again.” It was as polite a dismissal as he could manage in his current state, and the other understood it perfectly.

With a few courtesies and polite words, the curse-breaker took his leave, leaving the other wizard to his thoughts.

It seemed that he had won a few points with the Weasley for the risk he had taken trying to rescue him. If this was reported accurately in the Prophet – or even with a more positive outlook – he stood to gain quite a bit of public acceptance. If he was inclined to lie to himself, he could try to cover up his unprecedented bout of bravery as an attempt to garner goodwill, but this was just a possible good side effect, because nothing of this had been planned.

Settling back into his pillows, Marvolo idly wondered if Henry’s “dumb-luck” was rubbing off on him. Considering how many times it had served Henry to get out of a tight spot, it might not be such a hardship… if it didn’t come with constantly getting into danger in the first place, that was.

It was silent in the homey kitchen at the Burrow. With the younger kids in school and the three eldest at work – and with their own apartments – there was no one around to make a ruckus.

Both Molly and Arthur sat at the table, which was scorched and scratched by years of living with the twins in the house, sipping at cups of tea.

Arthur watched his wife, trying to assess her reaction to the news they had gotten yesterday and just now at the latest Order meeting. The news they had heard had sparked a lively discussion. One might be tempted to call it a shouting match.

The Order was split into two not necessarily equal parts. After they all had heard about the excursion to the lake by the sea that Lord Slytherin and several Ministry employees had undertaken the other day, the discussion had started.

Molly had been furious, as she had realized that her son hadn’t told them beforehand that he would be one of the two curse-breakers working on this assignment. Silently Arthur had to agree that this probably had been the wise thing to do. Molly tended to be overprotective of her children, even now that they were grown and living on their own.

Albus and Alastor had been adamant that Lord Slytherin had only survived that fall into the lake because he had horcruxes still.

Bill and Tonks were of the opinion that a You-Know-Who as he had been during the last war never would have attempted the rescue Lord Slytherin had. Bill had repeated more than once that there had been no time to think, plan, or weigh the consequences. His eldest maintained the point that this rescue was the result of a compassionate human acting on instinct.

After that, the meeting had dissolved into shouting, accusations, and recriminations. Arthur was pretty sure that both Dumbledore and Bill were right. Lord Slytherin had acted out of instinct when he had rescued Arthur’s eldest son, and he only had survived because currently he was unable to
“I’m… I don’t know what to think!” Molly said, confusion evident on her face. “The man did all those awful things. He killed my brothers! But now he rescued my son… Why is this all getting so complicated?” she sighed and refilled her cup.

Arthur drained his own tea and sat the cup down on the chipped saucer. “I think it is pretty clear, that he is no longer the man he was… before, that is. His actions paint an obvious picture. He’s trying to undo some of the damage. Sure, it’s impossible to undo everything that happened, but by all accounts, and all the rumours, he has already done quite a bit to aid the Ministry. He even gave up safe houses and other hideouts where the escapees might have hidden.” The balding wizard sighed again, registering the stubborn set to his lovely wife’s jaw.

“I don’t trust him,” she huffed and then busied herself with cleaning up the kitchen for the second time that morning. Whenever Molly had to think about something complicated, she tended to clean, cook, or bake, it was her way to keep her hands busy and her head clear while pondering complicated matters.

He could understand her perfectly. That Lord Slytherin had custody of Harry had been a blow, but Molly had been attempting to let the past rest, for Harry’s sake, if nothing else. When Albus had told them that the man had created something that prevented him from dying, killing people to do so, Molly had exploded. Splitting a soul… there was no way such a man could redeem himself.

And now their son had expressed his wish to learn from Lord Slytherin, as the man had such a unique outlook on the magic Bill encountered during his work from day to day. Arthur understood the fascination – he felt the same whenever he had met Hermione’s parents. To speak to Muggles about their life… he couldn’t pass up the opportunity – but feared the implications.

Sending his cup over to the sink with a wave of his wand, Arthur stood. “I think I should make my way to the Ministry. There is a stack of parchment waiting for me on my desk, and several reports to write. The vanishing keys have made a reappearance. Nothing really sinister, but the paperwork stays the same.” Taking his cloak down from the peg by the door, Arthur gave his wife a kiss and a reassuring smile. “I’ll probably be home late.”

Her only response was a weak smile and a nod.

Arthur walked out the door and through the garden. Hopefully Lord Slytherin really had regained a conscience and would choose another way. They all would suffer if the man should return to his old ways.

oooOOooo

Later on Thursday Marvolo sat on a lounge, resting against several soft cushions, his legs stretched out before him, covered by a dark green woollen blanket. He had a quill spelled to be linked to an inkwell standing over on the side table, and a parchment to take notes on.

Healer Malcolm Greengrass had insisted Marvolo rest today, not doing anything physically straining, so he had decided to make notes about his newest discoveries about the mechanics and workings of horcruxes. It wasn’t something he would have willingly experimented with, but now that he had experienced it, there was little point in not using the knowledge he had gained for his
He had asked Malcolm for an assessment of Bella’s state of mind, only to get a reluctant answer with many pauses and relativisations. All in all, it was clear that Malcolm didn’t see himself as an expert in mind healing and was therefore understandably reluctant to make any commitments, when displeasing his Lord might result in a harsh punishment.

Letting the man return home, Marvolo returned to his pondering about what to do. The gist of what Malcolm had been willing to say was that Bella would need some serious help to be able to function on her own once more. She tended to forget she needed to eat and sleep, was always out to quarrel with someone, aggressively searching for confrontation, eager to please her Lord, but unable to grasp that his goals and methods had changed.

After her last display she had kept pushing, even though she hadn’t had a wand to cast any spells. Only after Marvolo totally lost his temper and cast a crucio at her, did she quiet down. All the way to her room, escorted by her husband, she had been mumbling, thanking her Lord for his mercy. Marvolo had felt decidedly sick. Another new experience he could have done without. But the way she had reacted was just not what he would expect from someone who just had suffered from the pain curse. Begging, remorse, some outlandish promises, he expected all of that and more. But something like thanks, glowing eyes like a repeat would be welcome… no, he wasn’t comfortable with that. He distantly remembered that her behaviour had amused him in the past, and had trouble comprehending his own perspective on the world back then.

The only expert on the human mind he knew was the mind-healer he had found for Henry. So he had called Goyle to get his aunt here, as he himself was not up to travelling anywhere for this day at least.

He had managed to get a rough draft of the chapter pertaining to the regaining of a body, when his house-elf announced the arrival of Goyle and his aunt. “Let them in,” Marvolo commanded and swished his wand to send his work over to a warded cabinet. He wouldn’t take the chance of someone discovering his means of survival beyond those that already knew.

“Healer Goyle, come in and take a seat,” Marvolo greeted the female Squib, levitating a chair over for her to sit at a comfortable distance from his own place for a longer conversation.

“Lord Slytherin. What happened to you, if you don’t mind me asking?” the older woman said, sitting in the chair once it stood again firmly on its four legs, smoothing her knee-length skirt down as she did so.

“I had an unfortunate encounter with a few Inferi. But that is not really the reason I asked you to come here, Mrs. Goyle,” Marvolo answered, amused by her blunt question.

“As you know, I will not discuss anything from the talks I have with your son, sir.” Now there was a hint of steel in her voice and eyes.

“And unless there is anything I should be concerned about, I will not ask you to,” Marvolo said with a small shake of his head. He was reasonably sure he wouldn’t really want to know what they were talking about. “No, I have a question to ask you as you, Mrs. Goyle, are the only Mind-Healer I know.”

Folding her hands in her lap, she relaxed against the back of her chair, exuding a professional air. “I’m willing to listen, but I can’t promise that I will know an answer, or that you will like it, Lord Slytherin.”
Marvolo chuckled at that, it was surprisingly funny to encounter people willing to stand up to him, even knowing that he still was the Dark Lord and a dangerous wizard, if he choose to be. “A hypothetical situation,” Marvolo started, selecting his words with care. “If I knew an individual exhibiting behaviour indicating an unstable state of mind, would you be willing to speak with them and assess their mental health?”

He watched her think as he took the potions appearing before him on his small lap-tray, courtesy of the elves, scheduled by his own healer. To get better, he needed to follow the healer’s orders.

“Purely hypothetical, I would of course speak with someone in need of help, but depending on who that person is, I might feel obligated to inform certain authorities without a patient-doctor relationship to allow me the right to refuse to speak about my patient's health with just anyone.” So she had caught on rather quickly. But that was no real surprise. After all, she had studied a complex field of healing and was doing well in her chosen profession.

“So you would require a contract equal to that you have for my son to be safe from the obligation to share anything with possibly interested third parties?” the currently injured Dark Lord asked for clarification.

She nodded and continued to watch him attentively.

“That is good to know,” Marvolo murmured to himself, before taking a fortifying breath. Now onto the uncomfortable part. “I further wanted to ask, if you have the time to take on another patient for therapy, not unlike what you do for Henry.”

The woman, dressed in a professional grey coat and skirt leaned forward a little, her eyes glittering in interest. “I have time to accommodate another client. Am I right to assume it would be you, Lord Slytherin?”

Fighting off the blush of embarrassment he felt at needing help with his own emotions, Marvolo nodded. “There have been several instances of urges and actions I’m not used to that confuse me. I fear that several different oaths might be influencing me, as well as some effects from the curse that might still linger…” Marvolo knew that he would need to go into some detail once they really started, but for the moment this was the clearest he could be. For everything else he would need her signature under a strict secrecy contract.

“I’m certainly willing to help you cope with the changes to your life, and all other things that might still be lingering from the past affecting you now, Lord Slytherin. I guess you won’t say more until I have signed the contract?”

Instead of answering her, Marvolo summoned two of the basic secrecy contracts he had prepared waiting in his office. He would adapt them to the current situation and hopefully receive an assessment for Bella’s hope of healing sometime soon. Maybe the potion Severus had developed to help children forget about the muggle world they grew up in, to get detached from potentially abusive pasts, could help her.

After the mind-healer had left, Marvolo closed his eyes to rest, before deciding that he would rather read, since he was forced to remain at home tonight. Sighing, because he very well knew that he was distracting himself with this avenue of thought, Marvolo placed his wand back in his lap on top of the blanket.

For all the time he had spent thinking about his rash actions of yesterday, the implications for his future plans, ways to help Bella… he had not spent a second dwelling on the hug Henry had given him in the hospital. In fact, he had avoided the situation in his thoughts like the plague. It had been
the first hug he could remember – always assuming that he had been held as an infant – and it had felt good. Individual attention at the orphanage had always been something to be avoided, as only those deserving of punishment had received it. After a few times, Marvolo had done a lot to avoid the attention of the chronically overworked staff.

Summoning a book from one of the shelves, Marvolo mused that he probably wouldn’t be able to avoid thinking about this and similar situations once he started to work with Healer Goyle.

But for the moment he was able to do as he wished, so he would do exactly that.

oooOOoooo

After their charms class just before lunch, Harry and Hermione walked up to Professor Flitwick. Hermione held the small scroll with their proposal bound with a Gryffindor-red ribbon tightly to her chest. She was nervous and excited at the same time. They simply had to get Professor Flitwick to supervise their study club. Harry had reassured her for over a day now that they would get one of the teachers to fill the position, even if Flitwick should decline for whatever reason.

“Professor, may we have a moment of your time, sir?” Hermione asked with the most confident posture she could manage, holding her head high and managing to not sound as nervous as she felt.

“What can I do for you, Miss Granger? Mr. Slytherin?” their tiny professor asked, looking up to them while directing the last scrolls of parchment with the essay due today.

“We wanted to ask you if you would be willing to sponsor a Defence club we want to start,” Hermione answered, her friend silently standing by her side in support. Ron had opted to go on to the Great Hall as he had claimed to be starving, so he couldn’t wait and risk missing lunch.

“You and Mr. Slytherin?” they both nodded “What will be the focus of this club?” the Charms Professor asked, using the steps to get into his elevated chair, so he could look over the desk at his two students.

“Harry will take care of instructing in practical application, and I will provide the needed theoretical information. We plan to help others practice for their OWLs and for all to learn useful self-defence spells not necessarily part of the curriculum.” Hermione felt herself blush in excitement, and felt hopeful that the Professor would agree, as he looked excited himself.

“I have had a lot of experience learning spells from books almost on my own last year,” Harry added a little reluctantly, but determined to see their project through. “And we all can use the practice.”

Nodding with a thoughtful expression, Professor Flitwick straightened his robes and extended his hand towards Hermione. “I guess that scroll contains the proposal write-up?”

Nodding eagerly, Hermione handed the scroll over, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “It is, sir. Do you think you will have time over the weekend to read it?”

Chuckling – prompting Hermione to blush a little in embarrassment – the professor accepted the scroll, sliding it into a pocket in his dust-blue robes. “I will inform you as soon as possible, but I have a feeling that there will be no problem with your proposal, Miss Granger.” He hopped off his chair, ushering the two teenagers towards the door. “Let’s hurry or we will be late for lunch.”
Grinning from ear to ear, Hermione hurried alongside Harry towards the Great Hall. Now the fourth mostly incompetent professor – the imposter last year, and of course Professor Lupin had been good teachers – maybe wouldn’t ruin her chances at an acceptable OWL score. “What do you think, Hermione? Should we start with the Expelliarmus?” Harry started a discussion about what they wanted to cover in their club, finding an eager participant in his female friend.

oooOOooo

It had taken longer than Severus had thought it would. A few moments earlier a short message had been delivered by one of the house-elves, summoning him up to the Headmaster’s office.

The topic to be discussed had not been mentioned, so Severus was reasonably sure that he knew what it would be. After all, it had been the evening before that Doge had seen him buying a ring obviously intended for someone other than himself.

Once he reached the gargoyle in front of the office, Severus reinforced his Occlumency shields, preparing for the trying conversation he was expecting. “Toffee beans,” the Potions Master snapped at the guardian, stepping onto the staircase once the way was clear.

He made his way quickly up the winding staircase, barely waiting for the call to enter before he opened the door. He had better things to do this evening, and wanted to get this farce over with as quickly as possible.

“Severus, my boy, thank you for responding so quickly.” The genially smiling Headmaster motioned for Severus to take a seat. “Do you want something to drink?”

Severus took one of the two overly stuffy chairs and nodded. “A cup of coffee would not go amiss, I think.”

A few moments later a tray with two cups – one with tea, the other with coffee – were standing between them, and Severus added a spoon of honey to his hot drink.

“I wanted to inquire about your activities yesterday evening. I have noticed that you have been absent in the evenings much more often than ever in the past. And it isn’t related to your… other duties. Or is it?” The old man tried to sound casual but his intense interest in this development was evident.

“You are right, Headmaster, I had more reason to be elsewhere in the last weeks than in the last decade. And it isn’t related to my duties as spy.” Not directly at least, even if it was the direct result of an order the Dark Lord had given to his followers.

“Elphias told me he had seen you buying a ring…” The Headmaster trailed off, leaving a space for Severus to fill. The Potions Master refrained from rolling his eyes, the old man had lost his touch, or Severus himself had developed some resistance to the man’s attempts at guilting him to act a certain way.

“He did because I was, Headmaster.” Severus sipped from his cup, relishing the hot beverage. He would need the caffeine, because there was quite a stack of essays to mark waiting on his desk down in his quarters.

“Don’t make me drag everything out of you, my boy. I’m merely concerned.”
To suppress a snort, Severus took another sip from his coffee, before he settled the cup on his lap, relaxing into his chair.

“I bought a ring, because I wanted to give my bride an engagement ring fitting for her. It is as simple as that.” The look of utter bafflement on the old wrinkled face was worth much, maybe even the hard times that would follow his seeming escape from the man’s clutches.

“Bride? Severus, my boy, when have you found a witch to marry?” The old wizard recovered quite quickly from his shock, earning some grudging respect from the school’s Potions professor.

“I’ve known her for quite some time now, and over the summer we discovered that we share several interests, and are interested in each other as well.” He gave a casual shrug and a small smirk. Severus was enjoying this a little too much, probably.

“Do I know her? When did she graduate? And what will Tom say about this… endeavor of yours?” Now the twinkle had vanished to make place for a more calculating gaze.

“She never went to Hogwarts, and I’m not sure if you know her, Headmaster.” He made a grimace. “And the Dark Lord’s opinion on this will probably be something I will learn today.” He gripped his arm where the altered Dark Mark had started to heat up.

“The next time you and your bride meet, invite her to the castle. I would dearly like to make her acquaintance.” It was formulated as a polite request, but the steel deep in those twinkly blue eyes behind their half-moon-glasses, made clear that it was more of an order.

“Certainly, Headmaster.” Severus stood, his black robes falling to hang around him in their usual manner. “If that is all, I better be on my way.”

A casual wave of the Headmaster’s restored hand dismissed Severus, who abandoned his half finished coffee, in favour of making his way quickly to his Lord’s side.

ooOoo

Marvolo pinched his nose, trying to stave off a headache. He was sitting in his office at Headquarters working on a strategy to make it seem as if all the escaped Death Eaters had died. It was not an easy feat to find ways that would seem convincing. The bodies to appear as their corpses were coming along and would be finished in just under a week. They would keep for some time, making the window he could act in not too small. But he was still undecided if a big fire in an old house was a good way to kill off, so to speak, most of the escapees.

He sat back the moment he felt Severus cross his wards. He didn’t need to wait long before there was a short rap on the door.

“Come in!” the Dark Lord called out, carefully sitting up a little straighter, still needing to be careful about his injuries. It would take a few days for them all to heal perfectly.

The door of dark wood opened, admitting Severus, who sank to one knee in proper greeting the moment he had cleared the door. “My Lord.”

“Take a seat, Severus,” Marvolo said, taking in the Potions Master’s appearance. He seemed well rested and in better health than at the end of summer. Like some constant burden had been taken
off his shoulders. It was a trend he had observed in quite a few of his followers. There was nothing to prevent him from realizing that all his followers who had managed to escape a sentence to Azkaban had been less than thrilled about the signs of his return. Now that they knew he was sane again, they had managed to relax, and probably were sleeping better.

“I need you to brew more of the memory suppressant. And Healer Greengrass asks that you brew the potions on this list.” Marvolo let the list in question float over to his Potions Master who took the piece of parchment out of the air with precise movements. To read it over, nodding at most of the potions on the list.

“More headache potions, my Lord?” Scepticism and something that could have been concern coloured the dark-haired man’s voice.

Dark red eyes gave a flat look towards the Potions Master, who lowered his head, accepting that his Lord had no obligation to explain his actions to him.

“Is there anything of interest to be reported from the castle?” Since he had spoken with Henry already, Marvolo doubted there was anything really interesting to report, but the students were not likely to know everything happening at their school.

“The Headmaster is aware that I have found myself a partner I want to marry and wants to meet with her,” the really private man sitting a little too stiffly in his chair answered, not embellishing like others might have done when announcing their impending nuptials.

“Congratulations, Severus,” Marvolo said, feeling the urge to smirk. “Not that Dumbledore has learned about it, but that she has said yes. Lucius was talking about the recommendation he gave you, so this is not entirely unexpected. Do you expect trouble from the Headmaster?”

A dark head was moved from side to side, hands clasped lightly in the man’s lap. “I expect some kind of an attempt at manipulation. As my guilt over… past events has been a frequently used tool in his arsenal to control me and make me comply with his wishes. I suspect that he will fear losing control over me, as he has lost so much control already. But I’m confident that I will be able to deal with what he might do, my Lord.”

With the last few words Severus met Marvolo’s eyes, something he almost never did, and expecting the normally impenetrable walls of Occlumency the Potions Master maintained almost constantly, Marvolo fell into those dark depths. Just to find the picture of a laughing woman he didn’t remember ever seeing, and of a small phial filled with a silvery not quite liquid standing on a mantel in the man’s mind. After his expanded stroll through the Master Occlumens’ mind, he knew of his feeling of guilt over the breach in the friendship with Lily Evans and her death because Marvolo himself had put too much importance on parts of a prophecy.

Carefully retreating from the other’s mind – leaving behind a feeling of something like an apology – Marvolo sat back into his chair, wincing as some of the deep gashes not completely healed yet caught on his bandages.

Restraining his Legilimency, Marvolo addressed his Potions Master, who appeared to be totally unruffled by the intrusion into his mind. “I think you should devote more of your time to researching the requirements to claim the title of Lord Prince.” He had researched and found that Severus was indeed the last of the direct line. But he had not found anything on the conditions that had to be met by a prospective Lord to that family. Too many old families had vanished into obscurity, he planned to find as many wizards and witches as he could to fill the many empty seats in the Wizengamot. “You should take up the responsibility. After all, you yourself informed me that you had found no evidence of your mother being thrown from the family.”
The startled look vanished so quickly from the pale face, that Marvolo wasn’t entirely sure he had really seen it. “I’m unsure if I’m willing to associate myself with the name Prince so openly, after all this time. If I were to take up the mantle of Lord Prince – provided I fulfil the necessary requirements – it certainly would draw the Headmaster’s curiosity.”

“Pride might have prevented your mother and grandparents from speaking to each other, but do you truly wish to forego this opportunity based on the same? If you decide not to claim the title, that is one thing, but think about your future children. Do you want them to have the possibilities and opportunities that come with a noble and respected family name? It is a sad fact that the names of our fathers will gain us nothing in wizarding society...” Marvolo trailed off, recalling the list of family relations they had so far discovered in so-called muggle-born wizards and witches. Only Slytherin and Lestrange were British families, all the others had been from other parts of the world, mostly from Europe.

Bowing in his chair, Severus accepted the order, as politely worded as it had been. “I will, my Lord. How soon are these potions needed?”

Marvolo allowed the shift in topic, not thinking it would serve any purpose to rub Severus’ nose in the fact he once had called himself the Half-Blood Prince, resenting his Muggle name. “As soon as is possible.” If Bella was to be saved, she would have to take the potion soon, or she probably would do something unfortunate, leading to Marvolo's killing her.

“Then I will start on them in the laboratory here.” Severus stood, bowed with the reverent “My Lord,” coming easily over his lips, before he left with billowing black robes, closing the door softly behind himself.

Feeling the ache of his injuries deep in his bones, Marvolo decided it was time to go to bed and rest, as Healer Malcolm Greengrass clearly had wanted to order him to. Maybe it was a good idea to follow the unspoken command, the man was the expert in healing, after all.

oooOOooo

Friday evening found four Aurors sitting together in the Leaky Cauldron for a pint, or three, of beer and some talking. They had worked together quite a lot in the last weeks, and – despite their political leanings – had come to like each other as colleagues quite a lot more.

“What do you think will it take before the new spell is approved as evidence in an investigation?” John asked of his fellow Aurors, taking a big gulp from his beer.

“Well, the Unspeakables seemed pretty confident the last time I spoke with them this noon,” Shacklebolt said, nodding his bald head a little.

“And why shouldn’t they be? The spell is pretty awesome! At least I think so! I took part in a few of the tests they did. And as it seems the object is not in any way affected it should be finished soon. I think it should be enough evidence to investigate further if the sphere reacts to a person,” Savage exclaimed rather loudly, causing a few of the other patrons to look in their direction.

“And how is your investigation progressing?” John asked of both Proudfoot and Savage. “You already have some suspects, so I guess you are making progress?”

Savage made a face, and looked down at his beer, while Proudfoot snorted. “We have only
problems with one of the suspects. Or rather, his father. Yesterday I saw him speaking with the Headmaster, and he has been stonewalling our every move since he learned we suspect his son.” The Auror gave a tired sigh and took another sip from his beer.

Only hesitating for a moment, John waved to gain the owner’s attention – intending to order a new round – before turning to the two investigating the attack on his Lord’s heir. “If you need help, please don’t hesitate to ask. We can’t let the culprits get away with such an attack.”

After that they carefully avoided all topics related to work, speaking about the latest Quidditch game between the Cannons and the Falcons, eating various snacks and drinking a few more beers. All in all, it was an enjoyable evening.

oooOOooo

Sitting on a stool, reasonably comfortable thanks to a cushioning charm, Harry painted a picture of several snakes all entwined into one writhing mass of slithering bodies. Or it would have been a mass of coiling bodies if it had been a magical painting.

The light fell in from behind him, lighting the room next to the infirmary Mrs. Goyle and he used for his sessions every second Saturday. Not counting the sessions they had added to deal with immediate problems. Mrs. Goyle was giving him space to pour his frustration onto the canvas, and to sort his thoughts out so he could formulate them into words.

“I just can’t understand why I was so relieved to see him lying in that bed! Shouldn’t I still feel… I don’t know! Unhappy? About him adopting me? Why then did I feel so much lighter once I got to see that he was still alive?” He added a dark green to the lower right corner of the painting with maybe a little more force than needed. He just could not comprehend how he could have been so happy to see Marvolo sitting in his bed there at St. Mungo’s. For all that he played the young innocent Lord Slytherin, he was the man who had killed his parents.

“Do you think there is a rule about how long one has to feel something about a certain situation? Like how long I should be angry over my cat knocking my favourite mug from the table, shattering it? Ten minutes? A day? A week?” Mrs. Goyle asked lightly, ignoring the anger in Harry’s voice.

“No!” Harry said, his brush hovering between the colour he had just dipped it in and the canvas. “That would be silly, how would you decide such a thing?” It was silly to demand someone should be angry over such a silly thing for a specific time.

“Then why do you think there is a set timespan in which you should be unhappy about being adopted?”

Harry grimaced. She did that much too often, take his words and turn them on him by twisting them around and applying them to different situations. By now he had discovered something of a pattern in the way she steered their conversations and discussions. She would rephrase a question or place it in another set of circumstances so long until Harry started to really think about it. Started to question his reasons for feeling the way he did. It was maddening. And that it seemed to help wasn’t making it any better somehow.

Harry frowned in concentration, his brush adding shadows to the bottom of the snake-pile in slower, sure strokes. “He killed my parents, tried to kill me. Three times! I feel like… like… there
are so many people disappointed in me for being happy…” He already knew what she was likely to say to that. She always stressed the point that he had a right to be happy and as long as he was not actively harming others by being happy – or to be happy – there was no acceptable reason for others to object.

“Judging by the expression on your face, you are aware that the disappointment of others over your feelings should be no measure for your actions. But it is perfectly all right to struggle with all the changes still, and especially the change in your relationship to your guardian.” She sounded so calm and convincing. Harry wished that he could just simply accept what she was telling him again and again, and let his insecurities and doubts rest.

But all the looks the Headmaster had been giving him, the whispers from other students, all those pranks at the beginning of the year… it was hard to just forget about those.

The next few minutes were spent in silence while Harry mulled over his conflicting emotions, painting and adding details to his work. The sound of paint being mixed and the brush on the canvas were the only sounds.

He had felt the panic and fear as Marvolo had been dragged underwater by the Inferi. After the man had told him what had happened, Harry was sure that this was the moment he had felt those emotions through the bond he had to his guardian through the horcrux. It was the first time it had really sunk in that the other was human too. With fears and wishes, just like the rest of them. Since then, Harry had not felt even a little bit through the link. Probably because Marvolo was again able to shield it. Harry’s own Occlumency wasn’t yet strong enough to block it on his own.

“And I’m still angry over him not telling me that he had suspicions about who attacked me while I was flying. But now that I have thought about it quite a lot… I had suspected McLaggen as well, and I didn’t tell him either. I had no proof, and didn’t want to risk what he might do if he knew… It’s not really right to be angry with him over something I did as well?” Harry felt a little guilty that he had been so angry over Marvolo’s decision not to tell him, when he had done the same.

“And three from my own House! How can someone be so… petty… I know that people behave that way.” The Dursleys had made it abundantly clear that humans were capable of a lot of cruelty even towards family, so there was no question that someone could do such things to a stranger. He just didn’t understand why someone would do such things.

Healer Goyle gave him some more time to finish his painting and then asked him about the rest of his week, adding a more pleasant ending to the session. Just as they said their goodbyes, Harry thought of something. “Can you take this picture to my guardian? Maybe he will like it.” He was a little embarrassed about giving something he had made to a parental figure. One of the harder memories of his early days in school was of the one picture he had drawn for his aunt – one of the flowerbeds in front of the house she was so proud of – that had been ripped to pieces and thrown away, while the mess of colourful lines Dudley had produced had been proudly displayed for weeks in the kitchen.

It was a risk. But Harry decided he would take it, not really letting himself think about it very much. He had studying to do, essays to finish and lessons to plan. Hermione’s idea for a club gave him something to focus on, even if the prospect of teaching anyone anything was daunting. He wasn’t even sure anyone would turn up once they started.

With a small smile, Harry dried his hands after getting rid of the colours and made his way back to the tower. He wanted to see his friends and maybe play a game of cards before they started on the homework for next week.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
And for farawisa's help in keeping the facts straight.

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Halloween

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

17th of October

“You seem to be recovering well, Lord Slytherin,” one of the few Ladies present remarked with a smile – playing with her jewellery as if to draw attention to the expensive show of wealth – clearly alluding to the incident from earlier this month when he had been gravely injured.

“Healer Greengrass is an expert in his field, Madame,” Marvolo answered with a straight face he had trouble maintaining. It was getting old that everyone felt the need to comment on this episode, so even as it had brought him another wave of sympathy and good press, he now wished the public would let it rest. “And Potions Master Snape is the best I know. So I never doubted I would make a full recovery.”

This month’s big pre-session party was being held at Griffin House, as the other members of the Wizengamot had more or less subtly hinted that they wanted to visit the home of the Slytherin family and the last of the Potters. Currently, a mix of mostly conservative members, with a few of the neutrals and more open-minded liberal members – most called them the light faction – sprinkled into the crowd, were mingling in the rooms Marvolo had the elves prepare for this occasion.

“What is this?” Lord Hawkworth – one of those conservatives he had never approached, as the family wasn’t influential enough – inquired, waving one hand negligently at an unframed painting proudly displayed on an elaborately carved stand in one corner of the room.

Marvolo walked over, after excusing himself from his current conversation partner. He had placed the picture there deliberately. After all, it was a picture Henry had created with his own hands and sent to Marvolo. He quite liked the winding knot of snakes his son had painted, the selection of colours, the composition… it was a little rough along the edges, but to Marvolo’s eye – he had trained himself in the arts to fit in with the pure-blooded elite – it held the promise of a great artist.

“This, Lord Hawkworth, is the depiction of a pile of snakes, as one can find where they try to conserve warmth, or when males compete for one female… Why do you ask?” he spoke to the sneering man, nonchalantly brushing along the edge of the stand, smiling over the gift he had been given by his son.

“It’s a muggle painting!” the old Lord – easily in his seventies – almost shouted in disgust. “It’s not moving!”

A brow rose slowly towards Marvolo’s carefully styled hair. “Have you ever spent any time considering what goes into the making of one of our portraits, landscapes, or still lives?” The younger Lord asked sarcastically. “No?” They were attracting a steadily growing audience, and the still sour-looking Lord Hawkworth was deflating by the second. “Then let me educate you.” Marvolo didn’t even try to keep the condescending tone out of his voice. “There is a Guild of Painters with offices in most major magical settlements around the world. They guard the magic needed to animate paintings, give them some resemblance of life, quite fiercely, and only accept those witches and wizard into their ranks who are already displaying an affinity for the art of
painting."

Turning a little to the painting, gesturing at it with a proud expression, Marvolo changed his stance to address the others now all gathered in this corner of the room. “This was painted by my son, Henry, and he sent it to me. I’m contemplating how best to frame it. Lucius,” Marvolo turned to the blond man standing next to Benjamin and Xerxes, “can you recommend a good artisan to frame a picture?”

“Of course I can, Marvolo,” Lucius nodded his head as he was considered whom, of the many he knew, he should recommend. “Do you have a particular style in mind? If so, I certainly can get the right contact for you.”

There were some murmurs over the tactless old Hawkworth, some compliments to be forwarded to the artist, and then more talk about the proposals to be discussed in the next meeting.

Hawkworth was a thorn in their flesh when it came to getting laws passed. Still feeling resentment over being ignored by Voldemort and his Death Eaters in the past, at being dismissed as unimportant and useless to their goals, now the Lord used every opportunity to take his petty revenge.

Maybe it was time for the old man to give his seat over to his son, who was much more sympathetic to the young Lord Slytherin… Well, if this were to happen, it would need some careful planning and manipulation. The man still did not have much influence and so was no real threat, and there was so much to do at the moment already. It probably was not worth the risk he would have to take if he were to act soon. No need to rush.

Smiling, Marvolo played the gracious host for the rest of the afternoon and early evening. Socializing in this fashion was at the same time exhausting and refreshing. He really had missed this at the end of his last war.

ooOoo

“You like the picture?” Harry asked a little surprised, not sure what to feel. Marvolo just had told him about the evening before when he had entertained a group of Wizengamot members at their home, gleefully retelling how he had shamed that one Lord for his trying to make Marvolo look bad for displaying a picture that had not been animated.

A surprised look flitted over the handsome face of his guardian in the communication mirror. “Why shouldn’t I like your picture, Henry? It is very well done, and that snakes are the subject matter only adds to the appeal for me.” Before Harry could regain enough of his wits to answer to this, Marvolo went on. “Do you have a suggestion where we might hang it? I have sent it to be framed by a French artisan – an expert in his field, as far as Lucius knows – and it should be back soon.”

Blinking a moment at the expectant face, Harry’s thoughts were scrambling. “Uhhh… what's with the space in between the door to the music room and the library?” Harry suggested, not really sure if those two rooms were on the same floor, and if the space he had in mind – between two doors to whatever rooms – was even big enough to fit the picture.

Tapping one finger to his chin in thought, Marvolo contemplated a moment, before he answered
decisively. “I think it might be best if we look for a fitting place together, once you are back for the Yule break. Or what do you think?”

Nodding, a little off balance, Harry just agreed. “Yeah, we can do that.”

“Speaking about the holidays, have you made any plans to meet with friends? Because you are expected to accompany me to several social functions as my heir. You are excused from most of them, because you are at school.” The other wizard made a face, startling a nervous laugh out of Harry, which earned him an eye-roll. “I will remind you the first season after you graduate and all the mothers start pestering you. I will have to dodge witches left and right, starting at the end of November. And probably fend off offers for marriage contracts between their family and ours.” A sigh made its way over to Harry, and he was glad that Marvolo wouldn’t insist on arranging a marriage for him.

With a start, Harry realized that Marvolo was waiting for an answer to his question. “I’ve made no plans so far. It hasn’t come up. We're all too much involved in homework and classes. We have Quidditch training three times a week…” Harry trailed off, wondering whom he would like to meet during the holidays. He certainly would like to get away from Marvolo for a time if he could manage, but what would the Weasleys think of his visiting? They had offered in the past, but would they again?

“The first game will be the first weekend in November between Slytherin and Gryffindor, right?” Marvolo asked, changing the topic slightly.

Harry nodded, enthusiasm overriding his tiredness for the moment. “Yes, we all look forward to it. It’s too early to know how the weather will be, but we're training for several different scenarios. At the moment we mostly train to get Ron up to speed. He's really good when he feels like no one’s watching… that probably will be a problem, though.”

“I will tell Barty to keep the day free of appointments. I really want to see you playing. It has been quite some time since I have watched a game of Quidditch. And longer still since I felt that it would be more than an obligation.” Marvolo seemed really interested and Harry felt compelled to make a snarky remark.

“And will you sit in the Gryffindor stands, wearing Gryffindor colours, sir?” Harry tried to picture this and had real trouble with the idea.

A smirk appeared on the youthful face under crimson eyes. “I guess your friends will prefer if no adult sits among them. I plan to sit with the faculty. As for which team I will cheer on, I admit to being in a tight spot. Cheering for Slytherin would be appropriate because the House is named after our family, founded by our ancestor. On the other hand, you are the Seeker of the Gryffindor team, and not cheering for the team my son plays on would be odd. I guess I will have to cheer for neither, or for both teams.”

Harry had to concede that this could work. “I still have an essay for charms to finish. So…”

“You wish to end our call.” Marvolo nodded and sighed. “I probably should finish on my own homework. Think about what you want to do during the holidays. I think we should visit some of your family’s businesses, you should tell me if you have any preferences. For now, have a good evening.”

They finished their call and Harry stood from his bed to walk over to his desk. He placed the mirror into the drawer and picked up the folded piece of parchment he had been moving around since the summer.
The day he had been adopted and Marvolo had explained how life was to continue from then on, Harry had written questions on this piece of parchment. Questions he had wanted to ask of the Headmaster. Until now he hadn’t had the time or opportunity to do so, but the pure act of writing them down had shaken his belief in the Headmaster and his motivations. If that had been Marvolo’s plan at the time, it had worked out pretty well.

But it had felt like a spur-of-the-moment decision. Looking back, Harry wasn’t so sure that he remembered everything correctly. He had been under the influence of a calming potion, and pretty distracted besides.

Harry smoothed the parchment out, looking at the few questions he had written down then. He still didn’t have the answers to these, but wasn’t sure if he even still wanted them. With the way the man had reacted to the pranks that had been played on him – or to the murder attempt – it was pretty obvious that Albus Dumbledore did not have Harry’s best interest in mind when making his decisions.

Marvolo probably was the same, having his own agenda behind his actions, but considering his actions so far – the emergency portkey, the vow, the mind-healer, daily talks over the mirror – his agenda seemed to include Harry's being healthy, informed, and reasonably happy.

Thinking back to his dreams of someone coming and taking him away from the Dursleys from the time before he got his Hogwarts letter, the way Marvolo treated him came pretty close to what he had dreamed of.

He actually had sent the picture he had painted to be framed, wanted to display it somewhere in their home. Wanted Harry to help find a good place to hang it… Refolding the parchment Harry decided that he would use an opportunity to ask for answers if he ever got one, but that he wouldn’t try to create an opportunity. At this time there wasn’t much the Headmaster could say or do to compensate for his past actions.

It was a little ironic, considering that Marvolo had rated a second chance after killing his parents and making him an orphan in the first place. But Dumbledore had been the one to place him with the Dursleys, had never checked up on him, and had sent him back even after he had asked to stay somewhere else. He could have checked then, couldn’t he?

Abandoning that train of thought, Harry sat down to get started on the essay he had planned out earlier in the library. Ron wasn’t approving of the group's new study habits and had started to spend time with Seamus and Dean whenever he felt he could get away with waiting a bit longer before finishing his homework.

Hermione was starting to despair, and Harry was unsure how to help his friends find a good middle ground. Hermione could get rather obsessed with studying, but Ron tended to slack on his work, doing only the least he needed to pass. There was no easy way to bring those two attitudes under one hat.

oooOooo

20th of October
They walked from the room upstairs down to one of the bigger studies, leaving behind a raging Bellatrix, despite the calming draught Greengrass had administered when she didn’t cooperate with the Squib Mind-Healer.

Rodolphus was at his wit’s end. Had been for a long time now. Even before their Lord’s fall and their long stay at Azkaban, he had known his wife had fallen prey to the infamous Black madness. In a way he was happy that they never had had children. Not only because they would have had to leave them behind when they had been sentenced to Azkaban for life, but also because they would have been prone to inherit the same unstable mind.

He trailed behind the others through the dreary hallways, resigning himself to losing for good the woman he once had loved. In a way he had lost her a long time ago, but to finally accept it and move on was different from just knowing it.

They reached the room, sat down around a small table, and filled their cups with the tea appearing on it moments after they had all found their seats. Rodolphus got big eyes watching his Lord add three spoons heaped with sugar to his tea. It was the first time he saw the man drink tea or eat at all. He never would have guessed the Dark Lord liked his tea overly sweet.

Shaking his head, he focused his attention back to the conversation taking place.

“If there is a way to help Mrs. Lestrange, then it is a long and involved process.” The Mind-Healer gave her explanation to the whole group turned in the direction of the Dark Lord, Xerxes and Rodolphus mere spectators even when the whole affair concerned them more than almost anyone else.

“If I had only the use of non-magical remedies, I would put her under medication to counter her manic mood swings. Then I would try to determine if she experiences auditory or visual hallucinations. Depending on this, there would be a need for extensive therapy. Talking mostly… but as she is clearly not inclined to participate in any form of therapy for her state of mind… I’m not sure it is possible to help her back into life as an independent individual.” She looked almost neutral, but Rodolphus was almost certain that he had seen a flicker of fear in her eyes. He was sceptical that any muggle method of healing could help at all, but his Lord had said that muggles had advanced in the care for ailments of the mind further than their healers had. There was even talk among the Death Eaters that the same woman regularly met with their Lord’s heir to help him cope with all the changes.

Rodolphus didn’t think that … well, maybe he ought to change his perception of these things, if he wanted to remain useful to his Lord. It was clear to Rodolphus that the Dark Lord gave Madame Goyle the same respect as Healer Malcolm Greengrass.

“I could get medical studies and samples of medication for you, Lord Slytherin, if you want a Potions Master and Healer to look for a magical adaption. That is all I can say and offer, sir.” The woman fell silent, leaving a strained absence of sound in the room.

“Thank you, Healer Goyle.” the Dark Lord said, seemingly deep in thought. “Your nephew will take you back home. If your expertise is needed again, I will contact you.”

Through the words exchanged between the Healer and his Lord and his father, Rodolphus sat in his seat idly tracing patterns on the leather of his armrest, thinking. His Lord had spun plans to find new lives for all of them that had been in Azkaban, as he had done for Barty. The young wizard was happy in his position as the assistant of Lord Slytherin, planning the wizard’s social calendar, handling the daily owl-mail, and moving freely amongst the British magical community once again. His and Rabastan’s bodies would be among the first to be found, they both were planning
and considering different possible new lives, but as they had still a lot of healing to do, there was 
time left before they would step back into the open.

“Well, that was informative, but sadly not really a solution, now, was it?” Xerxes sighed, settling 
back into his own chair, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

Rodolphus looked up in time to see the Dark Lord empty his cup and nod. “You are right, Xerxes, 
but looking back on her behaviour in the past, and what I have seen in the last weeks, I didn’t really 
hope that there would be an easy solution.” Dark red eyes moved calculatingly between Rodolphus 
and his father. “I propose that we give Severus’ new potion, that we give to the kids, a try. It might 
help her, but if it doesn’t, I have a plan in mind how she might still be an asset for our cause.” In a 
rare – no, a previously unseen – show of vulnerability, the Dark Lord slumped back in his chair, 
closing his eyes, and took a deep breath. “If one of you has a better idea, I’m all ears.”

The eyes of father and son met over the table, both equally tired and resigned to the fact that Bella 
was most likely a lost cause. Waving to his father, signalling that he should be the one to say it, as 
the Head of their Family, Rodolphus emptied his cup of tea, before refilling the delicate china with 
steaming tea, adding cream and a dash of rum from a small flask he carried around with him.

It might not be wise, but he needed a little drink.

“If a dose of the potion is ready, I think we should get to it. With the young children coming from 
less-than-desirable situations it works pretty well. I’m not sure it will work so well on Bellatrix, but 
we certainly should try.”

“Well, let’s get to it.” With decisive force the Dark Lord pushed himself out of his seat and walked 
to the door, rightfully expecting his Death Eaters to follow, as they did only seconds later.

ooOoo

24th of October

It had been a few days since Bella had taken the potion created by Severus. They had had to force 
her to drink it, making use of the Imperius curse so as to make sure that she wouldn’t choke on it or 
be otherwise bodily harmed. 

Her behaviour hadn’t changed till now and probably wouldn’t. She was still insisting that she 
wanted to go hunt Mudbloods and Muggles, begging her Lord to let her go out and fight for him 
and his goals. Of course he declined her offers and begging, telling her she still wasn’t healthy 
足够的 not to be a liability in a fight.

But Marvolo felt decidedly better about the whole thing now. Healer Goyle’s assessment of 
Bellatrix and the fact that they had given her the potion... that he had exhausted every avenue of 
action available to him, appeased his half of the bond between liege and vassal.

He might have brought the severe situation on her by indulging her madness and even pushing her 
farther along into the depths, until she went after a pair of Aurors after he had vanished. But now 
he had done all he could think of to rectify the situation.
What to do next? Should he imprison her himself? Hand her over, claiming she had come running to his door? Whatever he would decide, it was common courtesy to ask her husband for ideas first.

So he had summoned Xerxes and his two sons to his study at Headquarters and was now waiting for them. Plans spread around him, Marvolo worked until there was a knock on his door.

“Come in!” he called out, waving his hand over the parchments, papers, and maps, sorting them into neat stacks at the side of his desk.

“My Lord.” Three men had entered, going to one knee in proper greeting. A surge of satisfaction coursed through Marvolo. He really liked the reverence given to him. He had worked long and hard to be acknowledged in this way. Another feeling he had lost due to his mangled soul.

“Rise,” he ordered, standing himself to walk over to the nicer seating area in front of the fireplace. “I called you here to discuss the fate of Bellatrix.” A lazy wave with his hand indicated the others should take a seat and they did. First Xerxes sat across from Marvolo in the other wingback chair, leaving his two sons to take the love seat facing the fire.

After Marvolo had called for refreshments – tea and small cakes with an apple filling – he looked over to the youngest Lestrange. “All attempts to help your wife regain her sense have failed. If neither of you has any more suggestions on how to help her, I feel it is time to decide how to prevent her from doing any harm to our plans.”

One look at Rodolphus, and Marvolo knew that there would be no resistance from the wizard if he should propose handing Bella over, or even killing her.

“I’m unsure what we should do, my Lord,” the considerably recovered wizard said, choosing his words with care. “She obviously is beyond hope, if it is possible to gain something from the situation, we should use it. Maybe she can be included in the plan that will result in us two being declared dead?”

Nodding slightly, Marvolo turned his attention to Xerxes and Rabastan, silently asking for their input. Not getting any response. The both of them didn’t seem to have any idea either.

“There is one other concern to consider.” Now it was for Marvolo to select his words with care. He didn’t want to reveal his method of immortality to more people if he could avoid it. “Before that night I gave something of great value into her care with instructions to place it into a vault at Gringotts. I’m not sure where she placed it and would like to get it back as soon as possible.”

“A golden cup with two handles?” Rodolphus asked, getting a nod from Marvolo in answer. “I saw her pack it into her pocket one day we had planned to visit the bank. I think she placed it in her personal vault. One of the smaller vaults, traditionally used by the wives of Lestrange men.”

“So only she can access it?” Marvolo frowned. That would be a problem. As long as she was alive, there was no way the goblins would let anyone access the vault but her. They really relished every opportunity to make the lives of wizards harder if they could get away with it. So maybe it would be better if Bellatrix was found dead?

Xerxes leaned forward, bracing his arms on his legs. “If I remember correctly, there was a stipulation in the marriage contract regarding the obligation to provide at least one child. If there had been wilful hindrance of having a child on her part, it would have been grounds for a divorce or for demanding compensation.” He looked apologetic towards his sons. “It was something I insisted on, because I didn’t trust her nature. She never seemed like a woman interested in being a mother, but I wanted to make sure they would have at least one child. Now I still wish for my sons
to have a family, but with Hermione, the pressure to continue the family is not as great.” This information was new to Marvolo, but considering what-all he had deemed unimportant at the time, it was no wonder he hadn’t asked or forgotten what he had been told about the marriage between the two.

“I could claim everything she has in compensation for the violation of that stipulation. So it would be sure that the contents of her vault will not go back to the Blacks. It might take some time, but I think this is the safest way,” Xerxes continued, while Rabastan levitated the second pastry to his plate without moving from his seat.

“It sounds like a viable way. Maybe it would be best if you started the process now, citing the discovery of your heiress as the reason you finally move to cut ties with her…” There had been some whispering about Xerxes’ reluctance to cast his sons out of the family and to dissolve the marriage. The first was more or less accepted, because that would cut off all possible bastard children as well. But that Bellatrix was still a Lestrange was something that caused some raised eyebrows in society.

“So she can be the scapegoat for the next planned reduction of the escapees?” Rabastan wanted to know.

“That would be best. I have a place in mind, and we should use the bodies soon, or they will start to decay. If I start with altering Bella’s memories tonight, we can set the events in motion fairly soon.”

Planning was swift from there, and the next few days saw gossip about the decision of Lord Lestrange to finally remove Bellatrix Lestrange, born Black, from the family. Some were suspicious of why he had decided to do so now, and some were happy that he finally no longer felt the need to keep the woman in the family, hoping for an heir despite all odds.

Marvolo worked diligently over a longer period of time on altering Bella’s memories to match a wild chase through France, discord between the escapees, and a heated discussion getting out of hand.

Soon the number of escapees would drop some more, hopefully helping calm the almost frantic search for them.

ooooOoooo

27th of October

Severus had spent the entire morning cleaning up his quarters. Of course there was no actual dirt or dust anywhere, as the Hogwarts house-elves were a diligent bunch, but there had been old potions magazines in odd stacks on different flat surfaces, some overly long extra essays lying about… In short, a level of disarray most would have named clean, but did unnerve Severus.

Especially as Sonja would be visiting today.

After a last look around his rooms – nervously ignoring the spotless bedroom – Severus made his way down to the edge of the wards so he could apparate to London and collect Sonja from her
home.

The moment she stepped out of her flat, smiling, Severus felt an answering smile spread over his face. It was a feeling he was growing more accustomed to by the day.

“Severus! I’m so excited to finally get to see Hogwarts!” They embraced, exchanging a chaste and short kiss, before stepping back so they could look each other in the eye. “And I’m a little nervous. Why does the Headmaster want to meet me?”

Severus sighed, hooking her hand in the crook of his arm, his other hand firmly grasping her hand. “I guess he is mostly curious who the woman is who has finally found my heart. And it is very likely he fears to lose his spy, as he used my continued attachment to my childhood love to pressure me into doing his bidding.” Severus explained while they walked slowly to a secluded spot often used for apparation because it was out of the way.

“So what should I say, how should I act to make it easier for you?” Sonja asked, anticipating his need for her cooperation so as not to complicate the delicate balance he had with Albus Dumbledore.

“Try not to meet his eyes. He is an exceptional Legilimens, and has no qualms using this ability against everyone if it suits his needs. Other than that... be yourself. I wouldn’t demand that you act a certain way just to make my life easier.” Severus would love to watch Sonja and Dumbledore go head to head over some of the topics he knew they would never agree on.

Sonja smiled up at him with mischief in her eyes. “But what if I want to act so I will make your life easier, Severus? Would you provide me with the information I need to do so if it is my wish?”

A dark head was inclined in defeat. If she wanted to protect him, it wasn’t his place to deny her the chance. “If you want to make my life easier, you shouldn’t let him see that you are open to exploring all kinds of potions – dark as well as light – you shouldn’t bring up things that reflect badly on him, and should appear suspicious of all that is termed dark by the Ministry and those that proclaim to be the epitome of Light.”

Her laughter filled his ears. She was obviously delighted by his list of things that would make Albus Dumbledore suspicious. Or the face Severus had made while listing them. It was hard to tell.

“He’s pretty shallow in his world view, isn’t he?” Sonja asked, not waiting for an answer before she continued. “I will do my best to stick to the image of a light-oriented potions enthusiast. So, take me to your home, now that you have seen mine.”

“I haven’t actually been in your flat,” Severus remarked with a smirk on his face. They had danced around this topic a few times, neither in a rush to advance their relationship in this direction.

“Ready?” The Potions Master asked his fiancée before spinning into the thin tube of apparation at her nod.

The village of Hogsmeade looked quite cosy, as it had the first time she had been here, but today Sonja didn’t only go to the Three Broomsticks, or one of the shops with potions ingredients, or books. No, today she would get to see Hogwarts for the first time.
Walking at a leisurely pace alongside Severus, up the hill and past the train station, Sonja asked her partner about his lessons, why he taught the potions the way he did, if they were taught in a particular order. And other questions along this line.

When the castle came into view the first time, Sonja stopped and brought Severus to a stop beside her.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Severus spoke into her ear, leaning down to her, inhaling as if savouring her scent.

“Magnificent!” she breathed, briefly wondering what a Muggle would see, standing here. She had read, and Severus had told her, that there were spells layered into the wards to let the castle appear as a ruin should a non-magical person lay an eye on it. “Will we be living here?”

“If you want to. And if I’m still a professor here once we are married. We will see…” There was no uncertainty in Severus’ smooth dark voice, but she agreed with him that the times were turbulent, and it was quite possible that all would change for Severus with his position as a spy.

They made their way over the grounds towards the school, not seeing many students out and about. It was a rather cold day, so it wasn’t really surprising.

What was surprising was that the Headmaster was waiting for them in the entrance hall – big enough to fit an entire house in, much to Sonja’s surprise – smiling overly bright.

“Severus, my boy, who is the lovely lady at your side?” The old man had opened his arms as if he wanted to embrace them, blue eyes behind half-moon spectacles twinkling like mad. Feeling Severus stiffening beside her, Sonja fixed a bright smile on her face, avoiding eye contact by inspecting the interesting surroundings.

“Sonja, darling, may I introduce the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore. Headmaster, my fiancée, Sonja Jiggers.” Sonja only briefly looked at the Headmaster, shaking his hand, before once again looking around.

“You have a really impressive building here, Headmaster. It was nice of you to invite me here.” Squeezing Severus’ arm lightly in reassurance, Sonja smiled winningly, watching a few students frantically whispering while walking by.

“Yes, the castle is rather magnificent. I know the Jiggers Family, but I don’t remember you attending our lovely school…” And there was a gap to fill in, as Severus had told her several times, a habit the old wizard seemed to have, using it often, probably because most people couldn’t stand leaving gaps, or perhaps even thinking they were giving an elderly man help with telling him something he had known but since forgotten.

“That is because I didn’t, Headmaster. This is my first visit here, and Severus has promised me a tour of the castle and his lab.”

They managed to ditch the Headmaster after they had been to the owlery and the astronomy tower. It seemed the old wizard was decent enough to let a young couple in love have a little privacy to kiss – Severus wouldn’t tolerate her calling it snogging – and enjoy the view. And it was a nice view, even when the days were getting shorter and more dreary by the day.

“So we can make a tick by snogging on the astronomy tower on the list.” the young Squib said on their way down, a spring in her step and a smile on her slightly reddened face.

“What list?” Severus asked a little suspicious.
“The list I made of things to do in Hogwarts, together with you, my love.” The look he gave her for this had her giggling, which made his lips twitch. “You wanted to show me your lab and the potion you're working on?”

Taking her hand in his, entwining their fingers, he nodded, getting them walking again. “Yes, I have the base finished and would like us to test it if you agree.” The lilt of his voice made a question out of the last sentence.

With a soft smile, Sonja stepped into Severus’ way, rose to her toes, and gave her grumpy Potions Master a small, chaste kiss. “I will gladly help you with your experimentation, and will test it together with you. And then we will have a nice private meal in your quarters?”

By the time the third group of students broke out in heated whispers once the couple walking hand-in-hand had passed them, a scowl was etched into Severus’ face. “My reputation is going to go to hell,” he sighed.

“Nonsense!” Sonja interrupted his morose statement. “They will learn that the fact that you let one person get close will not change your personality. Or do you think I will have such a deep effect on you?”

He gave her a kiss. “You are changing me and my life, don’t ever doubt that. But I agree that having you in my life will not change my professor persona one bit.”

Once they reached the private potions laboratory, they started to discuss Severus’ attempts at brewing a potion geared to identifying the probability of a couple having magically gifted children of good health. It was a lively discussion about alternative stirring patterns, whether to use scarab-eyes or the brightly coloured forewings of the beetles, if a simple pewter cauldron was better or if an iron one would yield better results.

Later that evening Severus brought Sonja home again and came back into his rooms. A small cauldron containing a royal blue potion no longer bubbling – that, according to Severus' theory, would indicate a high chance of magical children for him and Sonja – was waiting in the lab to be cleaned up. But for now, Severus would sit down on the love seat Sonja and he had snogged on – evidently another of the items on the ominous list – sipping on a small tumbler of fine whiskey, basking in the good memories of the last hours.

As Sonja had managed to dodge the Headmaster's attempts to get more information out of her directly, he probably would tap into his sources and probably would get the information he wanted rather quickly. That would result in another meeting with the old meddler. If the man could just stop calling him *my boy* it would be easier to put up with him and his demands.

As soon as his Lord’s heir and Lily’s son graduated, he would resign from his post and spend his time with his family and research.

It was a lovely dream, and it felt good to finally have one again.

oooOOooo

*28th of October*
Against the roaring flames, the stars of the night sky were invisible. It seemed that far too many people were milling about, keeping the gaping crowd at bay, drenching the surrounding forest with water to keep the hot burning fire from spreading.

It was an eerie scene, illuminated by the flickering red light of the fire and the flashing blue lights of several vehicles, the only sounds that of the fire, water being pumped, and people yelling, creating a deafening cacophony.

Percy’s French wasn’t good, but he had caught a few words here and there which led him to believe the muggles assumed that there was some substance in the house making the flames that hot and impossible to extinguish with water. Rolling his eyes, the red-head in a suit – he was in possession of one since he had started working at the Ministry, anticipating the need to interact with the Muggle Government sometime – snorted exasperatedly. Of course this fire was not the result of some silly chemical, but some really powerful dark magic. It wasn’t quite Fiendfyre, but it was dark enough that the casting had alerted the French Ministry. Calling several aurors to the scene.

Once they had seen the woman dancing around the burning two-storey house, laughing like mad, they had alerted the British. Percy had been appointed the contact for the French Ministry in the case of the fleeing Death Eaters who had been seen in various places around France right at the beginning at the whole debacle. At first Percy had been reluctant, but he quickly realized this was a chance to repair some of the damage his career had taken, due to the disaster that the Tri-Wizard Tournament had been. He already knew some of the people he would have to work with, and his French was getting better. So who else would be able to do this job right?

Looking down to the bound witch near him, rocking back and forth on her knees, eyes glued to the devastation started by the wand they had found on her, Percy was glad two Aurors were standing next to her. He wasn’t confident that he would have been able to contain Bellatrix Lestrange even in her clearly deranged state.

They would take her back to Britain as soon as the Minister – the French and the British – had approved the portkey to do so, but Percy would remain behind, coordinating the evidence-gathering. There were several fading apparition trails that needed to be followed, and who knew what they would find in the house once the fire was under control. If there was anything left at all.

With a sigh, Percy resigned himself to a long night and several long days to follow.

ooOoo

29th of October

House burns down in south France!

That was the blaring headline of the Prophet on Monday morning. Hermione read snippets of the article to the Gryffindors sitting around her, Harry only listened with one ear while he contemplated the mirror call with his guardian from the evening before.
Marvolo had informed him that there would be news of one Death Eater captured and several killed the next morning. And he had informed Harry that it was a front to give those supposedly killed a way to start their lives from scratch.

Harry wasn’t sure how he felt about this. The fact that he had been told as well as the fact that it had happened, that Marvolo was planning such things, and that he had told Harry about it. It was hard. On the one hand, Harry longed to trust someone, wanted a family, someone to care about him and not only because he was the friend of one of their children. On the other hand, it felt wrong that he seemed to have found what he wished for with the murderer of his parents, a wizard still plotting murder and the breaking of laws.

“They have found three bodies in the house, or what they think are the remains of three bodies. Currently they aren't sure if all three belong to the escapees, but the remains are large enough to belong to adults.” Hermione was distinctly green around her nose and didn’t touch her food again during breakfast that day.

“Good riddance!” Dean commented between bites of scrambled eggs. “When the Aurors wait long enough, the problem will solve itself!” A few of the Gryffindor boys laughed at that, but Hermione looked sceptical.

“I don’t think that it'll work that way,” Hermione said, folding the paper and handing it over to Parvati, who was reaching for it from further down the table. “It’s strange to think that that woman is related to me, even if only by marriage, and cousins once removed… still.”

“Don’t think too much about it, ‘Mione!” Ron said from across the table, after swallowing a large mouthful of bacon and fried mushrooms. “You are a Gryffindor, after all, nothing like that insane witch or those two brothers.”

Hermione got her notes for this day’s classes out of her bag, ignoring the speculation starting up around them. A smart move on her part, at least in Harry’s opinion, because he knew the feeling of being torn between two halves of oneself. Well, that was the way he often felt, it was quite possible that Hermione didn’t have that same problem. Xerxes Lestrange had a pretty tame official face, even if the family had a tainted reputation.

“Hey, Potter.” someone said, standing behind Harry’s back. Harry turned half on the bench so he could see who was talking to him. It was one of his year-mates from Ravenclaw, Terry Boot, standing there, looking rather excited. “Hey, Boot. And it's Slytherin-Potter, now.” It would look odd if he let it go, were someone to call him by only part of his name. There were so many rules of etiquette to follow, Harry wasn’t quite sure how he had managed to get so many of them into his head over the short time he had had lessons this summer.

“Whatever!” the other boy waved away the correction on how to address his classmate. “I noticed a note on the board in the common room this morning. You and Granger are starting a duelling club? What do you plan to teach?”

“Well, with the change in Defence Professor in the middle of the first term, and the theory-heavy approach the new professor has, we thought that having a safe place to practice for our OWL exams would do us all good. As for what we'll be teaching… I thought it would be mostly useful, versatile spells that can be helpful in many situations.” In fact, Harry had started to compile a list of spells he thought would be the most helpful to learn, while Hermione was compiling a list of spells that were known to be asked for quite often in the practical OWL exams.

“Useful in many situations? Like what, exactly? We had the same set of professors, Potter, what could you two teach the rest of us?” The other boy seemed quite sceptical, and Harry had to
concede that it was a point Boot had there.

“Last year I needed to know a lot of spells not normally taught in fourth year. Hermione did the research, and we practiced a long time to get them all right. I survived the tournament…” Harry had no intention of going into any depth here, “and learned a lot about learning from books. Professor Flitwick will be the sponsor, and you don’t need to take part if you think it will be a waste of time.” Harry tried to sound unconcerned, but felt the uncertainties raise their head. He had feared that there might not be any interest from students in their club when Hermione had first proposed the idea.

“I already placed my name on the list,” another voice joined the conversation. “Even if only a fraction of the stories being told are true, the two of them will be wonderful teachers.”

Harry gave Theo a friendly smile, his Slytherin friend was a good diplomat. A much better one than either Ron or Hermione.

“And if you still doubt all those rumours, Boot, then you might consider the attack from earlier this year. There were people on the ground casting stunners at Harry. He dodged them on his broom and managed to take them down. I certainly think that I can learn something from him.”

Boot nodded and left without another comment as one of the other Ravenclaw boys called for him.

“I still think we shouldn’t let all the Slytherins into the club,” Ron muttered loud enough to be heard clearly by all in the vicinity.

As Harry knew it would, this comment – made more than once and now slightly amended not to exclude all Slytherins on principle – set off Hermione into another of her infamous rants about the rules. “Don’t start again, Ron! I’ve already told you that an official school club can only be restricted by class level, not House! We could have said only third-years and up, or only those fifth-year and under. But not all but Slytherins!” Theo had a smirk on his face and Harry rolled his eyes at his friend, turned back to the table and continued with his breakfast.

“But we have four Quidditch teams! So clearly there is a way to have a club only for part of the Houses!” Ron wasn’t going to give in this easily. He had made it quite clear that he would have preferred a secret club, so they could have excluded whomever they wanted.

Nudged on his shoulder, Harry scooted a little further down the bench to make room for Theo. “So what do you plan to do in your first lesson?” The lanky teenager wanted to know, selecting an apple from one of the plates filled with fruit, clearly intending to finish his breakfast at the Gryffindor table.

“I thought to start with the disarming charm. You know, the one Professor Snape used against Lockhart? I’ve come to appreciate it quite a bit. It might seem simple but we’ll have a rather mixed group… probably.”

The rest of breakfast was over quickly, filled with planning and bouncing ideas for the Defence club off Theo, while in the background Ron and Hermione were bickering about the purpose behind the rules governing the school. It almost felt like a normal day, if he managed to ignore all the speculation about the fire in the south of France.
31th of October - Halloween

At breakfast Minerva sat down next to Severus, filling her cup with freshly brewed tea, looking on in fascination as Severus added a spoon of honey to his coffee. It was a little funny that he was the only one she knew that drank his coffee this way. There were, in fact, not many wizards and witches who drank coffee in Britain. Severus just was the exception to most unwritten rules.

When finally all the professors had made it to the table, Minerva cleared her throat to get her colleagues' attention. “I want to remind you all that Mr. Slytherin will not attend classes today, as his guardian has arranged for a day off for him. He will be back after dinner.”

Most of the others just nodded – they had heard this in the last faculty meeting, after all – but Albus looked a little surprised. “How is it possible that I am only now hearing of this? We can’t make such exceptions for single students, Minerva. Why wouldn’t young Harry take part in the festivities? We shouldn’t let Tom force the boy to be absent from the cheerful feast with his friends.”

Not the least impressed by his slightly chiding tone, Minerva placed her fork down next to her plate. “As the excusing of students from lessons for family reasons is handled by the Deputy Headmaster or Headmistress, it falls solely under my jurisdiction. There was no need to involve you, Headmaster. Are there any more questions?” A few headshakes answered her, and she stood and left before the Headmaster could voice more objections. It was hard to see him lose so much of his brilliance.

She was still skeptical about Lord Slytherin, but the fact that he had arranged for Harry to have a quiet day in remembrance of his parents, when no one had ever done so before, granted him a slight growing of respect.

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While the others went to their lessons, Harry waited, wrapped in his new warm winter cloak, in the entrance hall for his godfather.

Before he could start to worry, the tall form of his godfather walked through the high doors, his robes swaying around his legs, a heavy cloak hanging from his shoulders, a grin on his face.

“Harry, pup! I can’t really wrap my head around the fact that he got you out of classes. What’s his hidden agenda? What do you think?”

A little bemused, Harry realized that Sirius was trying to be cheerful and brighten the mood. Not that he needed cheering up. Until this year he had never really thought about visiting his parents' graves, or remembering them in any way on the day they had been murdered.

So he rolled his eyes and grinned, accepting a brief embrace from his godfather. “He probably wants to look like a thoughtful and kind guardian, I would guess. But as he has to act like one most of the time to achieve this, I think I can live with it.”

Sirius laughed, startled. “Well, it is a likely agenda. But I guess he has at least several more. He is Slytherin, after all.”
They fell into step and walked towards the entrance, Sirius slinging his arm over the shorter teen's shoulders. “I thought we first should go to Godric’s Hollow, take a look around, then go to the graveyard. Maybe? Get something to eat… I haven’t planned too much ahead.”

Harry nodded, not saying a word, looking at his feet and the path they now followed over the school grounds.

“I guess one plan is as good as any other,” Harry shrugged, “How is your search for an heir going?”

Moaning dramatically, Sirius placed his hand over his eyes, never faltering in his stride. “It’s so much work, Harry! I thought it would be easy, but man, was I wrong! The chronicles are a mess, no order I can find. And then the Squibs often changed their names, or went abroad – not that I would blame them – making it so much harder to follow their trails. I thought about just paying for a test for all muggle-born wizards and witches I can find, but sadly the Goblins really don’t like that idea.” The two of them turned a little so they could see each other and grinned. “Well, I have a few people following the paper trail through all of Europe. We'll see if they can find anyone… And if I can’t find anyone, I might just change the rules and name Nymphadora my heiress.”

Harry had only met the young Auror a few times, but he already knew that she would not really fit in with the stiff rules surrounding the old families with seats on the Wizengamot. “If you try she might just hex you to the ceiling of a room and leave you there!” They had a good laugh over this mental image and reached the gate leading to the road down to Hogsmeade and the train station.

“We'll apparate from here, I think.” Sirius decided. “No need to walk any further than the edge of the wards, after all. Ready?”

Taking a steadying breath, Harry nodded. “Ready,” and took a good hold of his godfather’s arm.

A moment of uncomfortable travelling later, they were standing behind a bush on fallen leaves that were starting to rot, quite out of sight.

“There's a small memorial in the middle of town, and the house…” Sirius swallowed, “the house you all lived in has been preserved as a reminder. I only ever saw the house that night before I stupidly went after that rat, and Remus told me about the memorial…”

Harry knew that Sirius wanted to let him make the decision what he wanted to see, what he was ready to see, but he was unsure himself. What could he cope with at this point in time? Could he visit the house where his parents had died? Where his darkest memories were? Those that he was forced to remember whenever a Dementor came too near?

Maybe it would be better not to go there yet.

“I want to see the memorial first, please.”

Sirius only nodded and turned them around so they could walk down a quiet little street lined with cosy little cottages and houses. It was a peaceful place, one that looked as if it could be the stage for a children’s book or film.

“You know, all I ever hear about mum and dad are little snippets. I know that I have Mum’s eyes and that Dad was good at flying. But what were their favourite colours? Was there anything that Dad could eat so much of that he would feel sick? You know, the things that are silly, things I know about my best friends… no one ever tells me such things.”

Obliging his godson, Sirius started to tell what he could remember, odd little events that had stuck
with him. A really memorable Potions class with Professor Slughorn, after which all students had had vibrantly pink hair, some Quidditch matches and the fact that Lily had loved watching the sport, even if she always avoided James.

It didn’t take long until they reached a small square in the middle of the settlement, the obelisk morphing into a statue of a man and a woman holding a small child.

For the longest time they both stood there under a notice-me-not spell Sirius had cast over them before they had started on their short walk through the town. It was odd for Harry to see a memorial for his parents and himself. He had seen more than one memorial for the dead of the two World Wars on school trips the Dursleys couldn’t prevent him from attending. Seeing one dedicated to himself, making him out to be a great hero… he rather would have had his parents than all this fame. And now he had trouble to feeling hatred for the man who had killed them.

He sighed. “It is odd seeing them... us, like that. Do you know who made it?”

Sirius shook his head. “No, but I guess we can find out if you want to know.”

“I think I would like that.”

They started to walk again after that, no particular destination in mind. Randomly walking the streets. “I was wondering if you could spend the Christmas holidays with me,” Sirius asked out of the blue, probably to break the silence and the mood that was steadily getting more morose.

“I would love to see you for a few days. Mar... he said I have to come home, because there are several social functions I have to go to.” Sirius made a face, clearly unhappy that he had to attend many of those as well, and then his face brightened. “Oh, we'll get to see each other at some of those! That might make them more bearable! So you'll have… spend the holidays over at Griffin House?” They were stumbling from one awkward topic to the next. But Harry appreciated Sirius’ effort not to insult his guardian. They had a few rougher discussions over the mirrors, but it seemed that maybe they could move on from this.

“Actually, he asked me what I wanted to do over the holidays so he could plan around my plans to visit friends. As he sees me writing to you, and visiting duties I have to fulfil, I guess spending time with you during a family holiday would be something he would demand anyway.” Harry started to smile again.

“You talk to him often?” Sirius wanted to know, not entirely successful in feigning indifference.

“Every evening. But you already know that. You gave him the notes on the communication mirrors. It’s nice to not have to write so many letters on top off all the essays we already have to write. I can’t even rush through the history essays anymore, now that Remus reads them.”

Sirius ruffled the mop of unruly black hair. “I remember that fifth year was a hard one. I know from experience. Don’t allow yourself to fall behind, trying to catch up will not work out too well.”

Without speaking the decision out loud, they started to make their way over to the church and the graveyard behind it.

A curious mixture of dread and anticipation filled Harry’s stomach, he was unsure what to think.

ooOoo
Filled with grief, Sirius watched over Harry from a few steps behind and to the side. He had conjured two small flowers that Harry had laid down at the graves. Now the teenager stood there, hands locked before him, eyes staring at the headstones, small drops of water falling down from his face to the ground.

In a way this silent crying made Sirius mad. His own parents had always told him that boys and men didn’t cry, that if you were strong, you would not show emotions. It was obvious that someone had drilled Harry in the same useless sentiment. It couldn’t have been Slytherin, as he had only had custody of Harry since the summer, so it had to have been the Muggles.

Sirius never had liked Lily’s sister, nor her husband. He had only met them a few times, that vile man actually only once, but he had known at first glance that if they’d had magic, they would have been great friends with his family. Bigoted idiots, the lot of them.

Well, it was early in the day, and Harry only needed to be back at school after dinner. So maybe they could visit one of the places Lily had loved to see in London. See a few happy places Harry could link to his parents. Creating a few happy memories, chasing away the gloom. With a little luck, they would find a cinema playing one of the films Lily had taken the Marauders to see.

It definitely would be a better ending to the day.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
And for farawisa’s help in keeping the facts straight.

First published on the 21st of April 2017
Defence Club

Chapter Notes

I have managed to get all currently written chapters uploaded here. Not all of them have been reviewed again before uploading, so I could catch up faster. If you find something really bad, let me know and I will fix it as fast as I'm able to. You will find the date I plan to post the next chapter at the end of the last one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was the morning of the first of November when Harry met his friends again. He had gotten back in the middle of dinner the night before and had retreated into his room and behind the curtains of his bed for some privacy. He had thumbed through his picture album, looking at all the pictures of his parents Hagrid had collected for him back in first year.

“There you are, Harry!” Ron greeted him on the stairs down to the common room, while Dean and Neville walked on before them, eyes still half-closed with sleepiness. “I wondered yesterday, but Hermione said we should leave you alone, that you would have come to us if you wanted.” Harry could see that Ron was not so sure about what Hermione had said, so he nodded to confirm their friend’s assessment.

“Yeah, I wanted some time to think. But now we can prepare for the game on Saturday.” What followed was a lively discussion about Quidditch and what the weather probably would be like, a conversation that lasted until they all had reached the table. When they met with Hermione in the common room, the girl rolled her eyes, and Harry and she shared a fond smile. Their friend was rather predictable when it came to Quidditch and Slytherins.

“So why weren’t you in classes yesterday, Harry?” Colin asked as he walked by, open curiosity in his eyes.

Ginny, walking a step behind him, gave him a light slap to the shoulder. “Don’t be so thick! What day was it yesterday?” She turned from a bewildered Colin to Harry. “Sorry for that. I’ll explain it,” she added to Colin, and dragged the young Gryffindor down the table to a mostly empty section.

Sighing, Harry looked at what was for breakfast that morning, and snatched up some toast and honey. “Is it really so interesting where I am any given day, that those not in our year and House ask about it?” It was more a rhetorical question than anything else, because Harry knew others were interested in what he did more than was normal, but he got an answer anyway.

“Well, yes it is. You are the Boy-Who-Lived and the heir to two families,” Hermione explained in her typical lecture mode, buttering her own slice of toast.

“You didn’t spend the whole day with him, did you?” Neville wanted to know, looking a little green around the gills, probably imagining a day in the company of Lord Slytherin, an intimidating figure even if you didn’t know that he had been Voldemort before his stint as a spirit haunting a forest in Albania.

“No, don’t worry, Neville. Sirius picked me up. It was…” He took a deep breath, avoiding his
friends’ eyes, looking down at his plate. “... not so bad. We went to Godric's Hollow. Visited the
memorial and the graveyard.” He brightened as his thoughts turned to the later part of the day. “But
after that we went to London, and Sirius showed me places my mom liked. We even went to see a
movie. Sirius wanted to show me a film he had seen back then with my parents and their friends.
But as it wasn't running anywhere, we just picked one at random.” He smiled in remembrance,
munching on his breakfast, while Hermione explained cinemas and movies to those students born
to all-magical families.

Nearing the time they would have to leave so as not to be late for their first lesson, Theo came over,
a bunch of scrolls tied with pale blue ribbon in his hands, the strap of his bag over one shoulder.
“Good morning, Harry. I thought I’d give you my notes now, so you can have a look at them in
your free period.”

Smiling at his first Slytherin friend – some of the others were tolerable, so they might become
friends in time – Harry took the scrolls to put them into his own bag. “Do you need them back,
Theo?”

The lanky teenager, still a bit taller than Harry, shook his head. “No, these are copies. You can
keep them.” Then a smirk appeared on the other’s face. “I know he wouldn’t like you to know, but
Draco is wondering what you're going to teach this Friday in the first Defence Club meeting. You
have seen the announcement that Friday will be the first meeting?”

Harry nodded, closing his bag, and taking up his goblet of milk, emptying it in a few big gulps.
“Hermione and I agreed with Professor Flitwick that this Friday was as good a day as any other.
So, Draco will be there?”

“I guess most of our year will be there. Who can afford to miss a chance to practice?”

Harry nodded, standing up from the table as most of the other students were doing. “With our
current professor, probably no one. Practising Charms or Transfiguration in the common room
works well enough, but Defence just needs more room!”

Soon they split up to reach their respective classes. Harry was deep in thought and a little nervous
over the first Defence meeting on Friday, the others concentrated on their next class. It seemed
Harry’s worst fear – nobody showing up – would not come true. But thinking back to the brawling
during that one Duelling Club meeting with Lockhart, Harry had plenty of reasons to worry.

ooooOOoooo

Clutching their warm cloaks over their equally warm winter robes to their bodies to shield them
from the biting wind here on the pier on the island of Azkaban prison, John Dawlish and Kingsley
Shacklebolt started on their way up to the imposing silhouette of the triangle-shaped building.

John had the “touch-sphere” in one of his pockets, and they were here to check Umbridge. It had
taken a lot of convincing that they should be allowed to come here to check that the old bitch had
not sent the Dementors after three heirs. So far, not one of the suspected people they had tested at
the Ministry had tripped the sphere.

“Think we'll be successful here?” Shacklebolt asked, rubbing his hands in their gloves to get them
warmer again.
“I think that Umbridge had a really good reason to remove Lord Slytherin’s heir from the picture. And with what happened at the school, I doubt she has any qualms about murdering children. She tortured students!” John had to take a few deep breaths to regain some of his calm, even if the anger was a nice way to keep warm. He quickly recast his warming charm. Sadly, those didn’t tend to hold up well under such conditions as these.

They didn’t talk any more on their way up to the prison building, and kept conversation to a minimum even after they had entered.

With the Dementors now back at the prison, the overall atmosphere was much more unpleasant than it had been the last time they had visited. And the fact that they had to use the boat rather than a portkey was an inconvenience too. But with the officials claiming there wasn’t much use in testing Dolores Umbridge, it had been hard to get permission to do the testing at all.

Walking down the dreary corridors, still wrapped in their cloaks, Shacklebolt spoke calmly in his deep voice, quietly so his words wouldn’t carry too far. “Think the Minister is trying to cover up behind her? There were a great many more obstacles to clear than I had anticipated for testing Umbridge.”

Nodding thoughtfully, John had to admit that the other had a point. If this was another thing to lay at Umbridge’s door, it would look bad for the Minister. “There were a great many hoops to jump through. But I think it’s more fear over there maybe being something, than real knowledge that there is something to hide.”

They reached the cell on the least secure level where Umbridge was being held. The moment their steps could be heard from her cell, pleading started in it, easily to be heard from their position. “Let me out! There's been a terrible mistake! The Minister values my work highly!” She went on and on. She probably had sounded more demanding and sure of herself when she had first been thrown into her cell. Now she sounded pleading and pathetic.

“Back from the door, Umbridge!” John bellowed, startling a high pitched squeak out of the woman in her grey-striped prisoner robes.

They heard shuffling and the sound of something heavy landing on the floor with a surprised ‘umpf’. Rolling his eyes, John opened the door with a complicated wand movement and muttered incantation. “Up from the floor, Umbridge.”

While the witch scrambled to obey, John dug into his pockets and produced a small sphere with three smaller spheres inside it. One had lighted up when the Auror on duty that day had touched the sphere, another when a clerk handling most of the Ministry’s paperwork had grabbed it in his hand. They were pretty sure that the last small sphere was linked to the culprit behind the attack.

Before the woman could protest, John had grabbed her arm, bringing up her hand and pressing the sphere into the slack hand with its stubby fingers.

One of the spheres inside the big one started to glow a bright pink.

“Well, well,” Shacklebolt drawled from where he stood, his wand in his hand, pointed at the prisoner to keep a lookout for his Auror partner. “I wasn’t sure this trip would be worth it. But now I’m quite glad that we took the risk.”

Stepping back from the bewildered woman, her once prim hair in disarray, John pocketed the Touch-Sphere again. “I think we can go, Shacklebolt, we have found what we’ve been searching for.”
They hurried to get back to the boat and the shore. There was a meeting of the Wizengamot today, and they both had to give reports to not only Scrimgeour, but to their respective leaders as well.

They had found the one sending Dementors after children. They might be standing on opposing sides, politically, but harming children was not something either of them would ever approve of.

oooOOooo

The first Wednesday after Bellatrix had been captured again and three bodies had been found badly burned, all members of the Wizengamot had been called to an emergency meeting. Marvolo snorted as Bartemius presented the summons to him.

Emergency.

Right.

And because of that, they had waited several days before calling the meeting. Of course Marvolo knew that there had to be an investigation before the Wizengamot would be called to judge, but to still call it an emergency meeting felt silly.

With a wave, Marvolo dismissed his personal assistant, knowing that the man would rearrange his schedule so he had the rest of the day free to attend the meeting, and started to walk to his rooms. He needed to change into his Wizengamot robes and his comfortable shoes. It either would be a really short meeting, or an exceptionally long one. It was hard to predict how the others would react, and what Cornelius would come up with.

With quite a bit of time to spare, Marvolo made his way to the floo and vanished in the green flames, whirling on his way to the Ministry.

ooOoo

Sirius smoothed his robes down for the third time since he had stepped out of the floo in the big atrium, walking slowly down the corridors to the Wizengamot chamber. He really wasn’t comfortable with his new position as Lord Black. Yes, he was sure it would be better for him to fill the spot than to let the seat remain empty, only waiting for his cousin’s son Draco to fill it when it was time. But he had run away from home not only because of the unpleasantness his parents had always spouted, or the fact that they had aligned themselves with Voldemort – even if that had been a large part of it – but also because he had wanted nothing to do with all this political stuff. And now here he was. Lord Black, member of the Wizengamot, forced to participate in the political dance all these years after he had left so much behind to avoid this responsibility.

When he entered the oval hall of the Wizengamot, a lot of its members were already present. Slytherin was surrounded by several of his closest associates – Malfoy, Nott, Lestrange – and was being glowered at by one of the less important Lords. Sirius tried a moment to remember his name, looking at the crest on the man’s robe for a clue, but gave it up quickly as not really important at the moment.
He nodded to Augusta, but walked past her over to the Black family seat. He cast a cushioning charm on the black onyx bench, streaked through with thin silver-white veins, before he sat down. He wasn’t in the mood to talk to anyone before this meeting. It probably would have been the wise move to talk with his allies. But as the reasons they had been called here had something to do with the recapture of his cousin Bellatrix, he was in a rather foul mood. In addition to his disgruntlement over his position and the need to wear such posh robes, he felt terribly conflicted over the whole mess. Or rather, over the fact that he couldn’t care less what would happen to Bellatrix. His cousin. The girl he had had quite a few shouting matches and prank-wars with when they had been children. He wished he weren't required to take part in deciding what was to be done next.

Watching in detached interest as the rest of the witches and wizards of the Wizengamot trickled into the hall and to their seats, Sirius played with his wand. The work on Grimmauld Place was going well, old grime and décor vanishing to make way for new wood panelling, carpets, and paint. He was going through the library and all the old records he had found, still searching for leads to find an heir. After Harry had decided the position would bring so many additional responsibilities that it would be too much for him, Sirius had approached Andromeda and her daughter Nymphadora. He liked the young woman, who was working as an Auror. But both she and her mother had declined the position as heir to the Black family, even if he could manage to change the rules of inheritance to allow for a female heir and Head of House. He couldn’t really blame them, he could do without the title of Lord Black himself.

A bang shot from the wand of Lord Abbot tore Sirius out of his thoughts. “Please be seated, Ladies, Lords. We will start in a few moments.”

Small groups broke up and dispersed to take their respective seats. The murmurs subsided and ended, leaving a permeating silence behind. Only the sound of cloth rustling, and the shuffling of parchment by the secretaries and assistants sitting at the tables in the middle, could be heard.

The Minister stood. “My Lords and Ladies. I’m proud to announce that the French Ministry and our own Aurors managed to capture Bellatrix Lestrange at the scene of a house fire this last weekend.” The man in the offensive magenta robes of the Ministry members – Sirius felt that this was one of the best pranks he had ever seen, making them all wear those colours – stood there like a peacock waiting to be praised.

Sirius rolled his eyes. What utter codswallop. The man had done nothing to gain praise. If there was someone to be recognized for effort, it would be the Aurors and the French Ministry who had done all the actual work.

Nonetheless a few polite claps were heard throughout the hall, but ended again rather quickly.

“She will be Kissed by the end of the week, as the Head Auror assured me that her questioning will be finished by then. We will inform you of any and all worthwhile information gathered from her.”

The Minister’s tone was matter-of-fact and caused first shocked silence, followed immediately afterwards by outrage. It was not the place of the Minister to pass out Kiss orders like candy at a birthday party.

Malfoy stood, a sneer on his face. As Bellatrix was his sister-in-law, it was expected of him to have an opinion on this. Even disregarding the fact that he was – or had been – a Death Eater. “Didn’t we just have this, Minister? I remember there was a ‘Kiss on Sight’ order on Lord Black. And he was innocent! Dementors were sent out after children! I don’t think we should skip the normal procedure. I rather think we should stick to it, or even make it more controlled, to make sure that no soul of an innocent is fed to these vile creatures.” The fierce way the man spoke...
caught Sirius by surprise. Until now he had not seen the man this passionate about anything outside of battles. Always so calm and composed, mocking his opponent most of the time. But then they had never really interacted before.

Madame Bones stood as well. “I agree with Lord Malfoy. Even with the fact that Bellatrix Lestrange actually was found guilty by a court, just issuing a Kiss order is not under your jurisdiction, Minister.”

Sirius thought that the red colour of Fudge’s face clashed quite wonderfully with his robes. It was obvious the man didn’t like being reminded of what he couldn’t do.

In the face of the murmurs of agreement, the Minister was quite flustered as he responded. Maybe he hadn’t anticipated to meet any resistance over this. “Well, excuse me, but I think it is the best solution. She escaped Azkaban! People were killed! Property destroyed! What would you rather do? I see no alternative to the Kiss!”

“If we don’t think about this, it is no wonder you can’t see an alternative,” someone from the benches in the back called into the room, not bothering to stand. Sirius saw quite a few of the others nod at this.

Augusta Longbottom stood. “As one who suffered from her actions in the last war, I think we should have a look at the facts.” She waited for all to settle down once more, and only started to speak once the Minister had sat down too. “There is no doubt she did commit atrocious crimes in the last war. But she only managed to escape from Azkaban because the Dementors had been removed, allowing criminals to make their way to the island in an attempt to free some of the prisoners. She never did manage it while the Dementors were on watch.”

She looked rather intimidating, the lines around her eyes deep with worry and tension. “I don’t see a reason to shorten her sentence by essentially killing her.”

“I have a question for Lord Lestrange, as she is part of his family, I want to know why he hasn’t disowned her!” One of the less important Lords associated with the Light called from his place behind Sirius. The dark-haired wizard didn’t bother turning in his seat to have a look. It was rather easy to place someone he didn’t know by watching the others whose place on the political spectrum he already knew.

Lord Lestrange stood, a grave expression on his face, his posture rigid. “I don’t see why you should be entitled to know about my family affairs.” His tone was scolding, and Sirius felt himself reminded of Professor McGonagall the one time she had held a stern lecture about using transfiguration on the pets of other students as a prank. “But as your accusation is no longer true, I will give a short explanation.” The old wizard – once one's hair started to turn white, Sirius thought it only right to call the person old – turned to the one disrupting the proceedings, and therefore looking in Sirius’ direction, giving the animagus an excellent view of his displeased expression. “In retrospect, I think I just refused to deal with the situation, the results of my own sons’ foolish actions.”

Sirius noticed Slytherin lowering his gaze to his hands, folded in his lap. He still couldn’t decide if the remorse was genuine or just supreme acting.

Lestrange continued, “But a few days ago, I dissolved the marriage of my son to this witch, calling on a clause in the marriage contract. I will not disown my sons, because that would cut off all children they might have had somewhere.” The old wizard stiffly sat down again on his seat, spreading his robes in an expert movement. Practice made perfect, it was impressive, how the older Lords and Ladies managed to convey their disdain or disapproval just in the manner they moved
the masses of fabric of the traditional robes.

“If she no longer is a Lestrange,” Marchbanks stated in her slightly brittle, but still cutting, voice, “then she is a Black again. Is she not?”

All eyes turned to Sirius. Who barely managed to keep from fidgeting. Knowing that it was time for himself to express his stand on this, Sirius stood. “I haven’t managed to get around to it until now, but for her crimes against our society, I fully intend to cast her from the family. So, no, she will not be a Black for long.” Murmurs spread through the room. Sirius sat down again. He needed to look up the steps to cast someone out of the family once he was home again. And once he was already searching through that particular book, he would also look up the way to accept someone back into the family. He planned to change the image of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, a muggle-born heir and half-blood family members were an excellent starting point.

“Do we even know if she is responsible for those that were murdered during the escape?” Lord Nott wanted to know, directing the debate back to the topic at hand.

Madame Bones, as the Head of Law Enforcement, answered that question. “We don’t know who killed the Auror on duty, or the civilians invading the prison. It could have been any of the escaped Death Eaters.”

“That is totally beside the point!” the Minister interrupted. “She was certainly involved in the deaths. And therefore should be punished accordingly. Escape from Azkaban is punishable with the Kiss!”

Now Sirius could no longer pretend not to be interested, and stood. Again all eyes moved to him. “Before I fled there never was a successful escape from Azkaban. So I doubt there is something like a standard punishment for escape, because there never was a reason for one to exist. That you, Minister, just set the Kiss on Sight order does not create a precedence! I agree with Dowager Longbottom. Let us send her back to Azkaban. Now that the Dementors are back there, she should be safe enough.”

Maybe being Lord Black was not so bad after all. Sirius sat down again while the others around him argued. Should there be a set punishment for escape from Azkaban? Now that there had been two successful escapes, it was clear that it wasn’t as impossible as they had always believed. Others remarked that they had adjusted the procedures for animagi, and that the others only managed to escape because the Dementors had been removed. It moved back and forth without any hint of the discussion going anywhere.

Amused and a little bit annoyed as well, Sirius noticed that they were drifting away from the main point again. If they continued to stray from the topic so much, they would be here until late at night. He had hoped to work a little more on his new motorcycle. Hagrid had offered to return the one he had borrowed all those years ago, but Sirius had declined. It was more fun to start from scratch with another motorcycle. And he could use some fun in between searching for an heir, renovation, and all the other pesky responsibilities of an adult wizard.

“Why don’t we give her a new chance at life by de-aging her back to an infant?” One of the Lords on the highest level, that of the Houses, asked out of the blue, silencing the room. Sirius only knew that he was known for his daring potions experiments, but sadly not for his successes. For the life of him, the dark-haired animagus couldn’t remember the man’s name – he was really bad at this, and probably should make an effort to learn all the names – but it was of no consequence as his suggestion was already being screamed and shouted into the ground.

“That is preposterous! There is no reliable de-aging potion!”
“At least two of the three who have tried to use the one recipe known, died!”

“All accidents resulting in de-aging had horrible consequences!”

The Lord proposing this idea, stood there like a rock between waves on a stormy sea. Out-waiting the storm. Sirius was slightly impressed by his composure, and suspicious of the man’s motivation.

“I think I have created a potion that will be successful where others were not. I used the information gathered after all those accidents you spoke about.” He waved his hand in one direction, indicating someone. “Why not risk it? Some of you clearly would approve of giving her over to the Dementors. Others would condemn her to a slow death on that damnable island. With my potion, there would be a chance for her to live!”

Sirius snorted. And there was the motive. A person to test his potion on. Hopefully that man was enough of a coward to never to go after people to get his test-subjects.

Suddenly an eerie silence started to spread through the room. Sirius looked around and spotted Lord Slytherin no longer sitting with an expression of hidden pain, standing in front of the silver seat with its two snakes. What was he up to now?

Only when all sounds had stopped did the man in his green robes of silk and wool start to speak. “It is noble to consider giving Bellatrix… a new chance to live. But I feel I need to make you aware of circumstances you all seem to forget.” He spoke calmly and deliberately, and Sirius found himself listening attentively, almost captivated by the performance.

“It might have passed by your notice, but even if someone is declared not responsible for past actions, most will still remember and hold them responsible.” Blue eyes wandered unhurriedly over the assembled wizards and witches, not accusing, but more like he dared them to contradict him.

“I can handle the reactions, because I remember, and am a grown man. But if she survived, if we found someone willing to take her in, raise her? She would most likely not remember anything. But the world around her would remember. The people raising her would remember.” The man made a pause, tucking some hair behind his ear – a nervous tell? – swallowing, before he continued. “Growing up despised for something you can’t understand, hated for something you can’t remember doing. Don’t you think, can’t you see, that this would be crueler than death or imprisonment?” He turned slowly, addressing those behind him as well. “Is imprisonment not kinder than stealing a soul? Feeding it to some horrible monster? I would prefer death over that fate, and I guess many others here would agree.”

And just like that he stopped speaking. If Sirius had someone to bet with right now, he would have liked to bet how many of the others had their jaws hanging down, leaving them open mouthed and looking stupid. Well, whatever he thought about Slytherin most of the time, here he had a good point. Sirius remembered the horror of Azkaban. Sending Bella back there would be punishment enough, in his opinion. So when a vote was called, that was what he voted for.

ooOoo

Marvolo was a little surprised, because he had not lied when he said that he would prefer death over the kiss. Of course he would choose living over either of those, but almost all cultures around the world had some kind of story around souls and rebirth. There was almost always some hope in
them. All stories speaking about soul-consuming monsters – not that he had found that many – insisted that the soul was lost and never would return once consumed. So better the way with a little bit of hope than the one not leaving any kind of loophole.

He sat down after this short spontaneous speech, watching as the Wizengamot slowly came to a conclusion. He voted with the majority to just send the witch back to prison, even if the idea to regress her back to an infant had some merit. But as long as those around her knew who she had been, it would probably end in her being harassed for something she couldn’t understand and could do nothing about. It would most likely turn out something like his own childhood, and look where that had led him.

No need risking the creation of another individual bent on destruction. But the idea of de-aging might work for those of his followers that still were hiding out at Headquarters. Rodolphus and Rabastan might benefit from it, and could maybe be passed off as their own sons. Severus certainly would like the challenge of searching for a reliable de-aging potion. They could pose as half-blood sons from Muggle mothers… he would have to think about this some more.

While the normal tedious procedure of voting went on around him, Marvolo watched two figures in the familiar crimson of the Auror Corps entering the chamber, walking along like they were trying not to draw too much attention to themselves. They reached the seat of Madame Bones and she bent down a little down to make it easier for one of the Aurors to speak into her ear.

Marvolo was intrigued, watching them with interest, not paying any mind to the last counting of those who had abstained from the vote.

Before the Chief Warlock could dismiss them and declare the session closed, Madame Bones stood and called out to gain their attention. “Lords and Ladies, please, if I might ask for another moment of your time. I was just informed that the Aurors investigating the case of the rogue Dementors have found evidence that Dolores Jane Umbridge may have been involved in this crime. I wish to inform you all that there will be an in-depth investigation into her possible involvement. We will keep you informed of developments.”

After that they started to rise and depart. Marvolo walked over to Xerxes, planning to get him and his sons together to plan what to do to create them a new life, now that their deaths would hopefully be official soon.

ooOoo

Back in his office, Cornelius filled a small tumbler with his best scotch, and sat down behind his desk with a weary sigh. It was rather unfortunate that he now had no prisoner to hand over to the Dementors. They had been rather unhappy over their temporary removal from the prison, understandably so. But he had hoped that handing over someone to them to be Kissed would smooth the unrest over.

Now he had to search for another solution. Maybe he could push for Dolores to be Kissed?

If the foolish woman truly had sent Dementors after three heirs of respectable families, the Wizengamot might feel it a poetic justice.

He would need to remember that he was deeply wounded by Dolores’ betrayal. It wouldn’t be
beneficial for his continued position as Minister if he got caught up in the schemes of his former Undersecretary.

Filius was a little excited as he levitated the four enormous house tables to the sides of the Great Hall on Friday afternoon. After the lists from all four Houses with the names of those willing to participate had been collected, it had been clear that no single classroom was big enough to teach all the students in. At least, not for something needing as much space as practical defence did. So the faculty had decided it was best to use the Great Hall for this club.

The last time they had attempted to establish something like this – three years prior – Filius had declined any kind of association with it, as Gilderoy had been going to head it. Even as he was sure that duelling in a competitive setting, as he had done for many years, was nothing compared to actual battle, he had been sure the vain man was unable to teach it. And on top of that Gilderoy had had already proven by then that he had no real knowledge of anything related to the subject he had been teaching. In an assessment like this, Filius knew he could trust his Ravens.

In formal duels, there were a great many rules to follow. Actual battle knew no rules of any kind. In a duel you could be sure that there was only that one opponent, and the area was clear and enclosed in a shield to protect the audience. There was nothing to hinder anyone from sending a fatal spell at your back in a fight.

This club was meant to give the students a little bit of practical defence experience. It wasn’t meant to be a place to train them in actual battle, nor in formal duels. He guessed it would land somewhere between a practical Defence lesson and exchange about practical application in dangerous situations. Mr. Slytherin had a lot of experience with those.

Satisfied with his preparations, Filius made his way over to the dais housing the head table, and hopped up on the edge to sit there and wait.

Only moments later three students entered the hall through the big doors. All of them in Gryffindor robes. Mr. Slytherin and his two friends.

They spotted their teacher the moment after they had taken in the changed appearance of the Great Hall.

With a big grin Filius greeted his students. “Miss Granger, Mr. Slytherin, Mr. Weasley! How nice to see you all. Do you feel adequately prepared? Do you need any last-minute advice, or information?” Heading a student club of this magnitude was something new. Most of the other clubs – gobstones, the choir, dancing – only were attended by a few students, a club attracting most of the student population was something else. Even if it would end up with only the first meeting this big.

“No, thank you, Professor. I think we are prepared as well as we can be,” the young witch answered his question, and then started with questions about further reading material for the current class of charms they were studying.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Filius watched other students walking in through the doors in small groups, only slowly drifting closer to where he and the three Gryffindors were waiting. Gryffindors
and Ravenclaws were those most eager to get to the front. A few Slytherins kept farther back. He would have to watch out for trouble brewing. Only too often did those two groups clash with one another.

Standing, the short Charms Professor waved for the students to come further into the room. “Come in, come in! No need to be shy! You'll see more when you stand in front!”

Minutes before the meeting would officially start, the slow steady stream of students stopped. A low murmur filled the room with background noise, all waiting full of excited anticipation.

Time to get the show started.

“Welcome! Welcome you all, to this first Defence Club meeting. I’m here to make sure there is help at hand if something goes wrong. The club itself is being led by two of your fellow students. Miss Granger and Mr. Slytherin here.” He made a sweeping dramatic gesture to the two nervous fifth-years, giving the word over to them.

Clearing her throat, Miss Granger took a step forward, dragging her friend behind her by his robe sleeve, causing Filius to grin again. “Welcome. We’re all here because we want to learn and practice how to defend ourselves and others in dangerous situations. Theory is all well and good, but it won’t help us when there’s really a need to defend ourselves.”

With each word the witch with her untamed hair spoke, her confidence seemed to grow, her voice getting steadier, the barely-noticeable tremor vanishing from it.

“I’m good at theory, and Harry is really good at the practical side of defence. Together with you, we should be able to practice what we might need in the future, and what we certainly will need for our exams.” That got a few chuckles and joking calls from the students, especially from the Gryffindors, causing the young witch to blush as she gave the still nervous-looking teen boy standing beside her a nudge forward.

One step took Mr. Slytherin right to the edge of the dais. Filius saw him take a deep breath, exhaling it slowly before he started to speak.

“I… didn’t expect so many would come. You’ve all have probably heard quite some stories about the adventures my friends and I have found ourselves in since we came to Hogwarts. I’m quite sure that most of it is exaggerated or invented. No one really tells me the rumours going around. But that's not really why we're here. I've found that it helps to know a lot of spells to react in a situation you might be in while on your own, or need to protect someone who can’t do so on their own. With Hermione’s help and with ideas from you, I hope to help us all expand our spell knowledge and our ideas of how to use them.”

Filius listened and watched. With a little training and experience, Mr. Slytherin might become a great orator in time. The students were listening, and the boy’s voice carried into the far corners of the Hall without the assistance of a spell. He would make a great Lord and member of the Wizengamot one day.

“I thought we should start with Expelliarmus today, see where everyone is at – with what shoddy professors we all have had most of the time – and collect ideas at the end of the session.” He tried to sound confident, but angry murmurs from many of the older years made him falter, before he straightened his spine.

“Those of you already familiar with the spell can help those that aren’t, to get it right.” He already waved for his friend to help him demonstrate when an angry voice called up from the audience.
“What good is such an easy spell? What can you do with it? It’s so easy to dodge!” A few cruel laughs seemed to agree with the speaker, and Mr. Slytherin turned to the students once more, searching the crowd just as Filius did.

The Charms Master tried to locate the potential troublemaker, he – the voice had sounded like a boy – was someone to watch.

“It is an easy enough spell,” Mr. Slytherin agreed. “One that first-years can master. One that to know well enough to cast it in your sleep can help you react fast. Maybe faster than your opponent can dodge, or fast enough to force them to dodge, buying you time to run.” Those green eyes roamed the crowd, just as unable as Filius to locate the speaker, now again silent and hidden among his peers.

“When we – Hermione, Ron and I – were in third year, we knocked out an adult wizard with three simultaneously cast Expelliarmuses. Don’t dismiss a spell just because a first-year can cast it.” A smirk appeared on the boy’s face. “Remember that troll that got into the school back when I started here? If you’re younger, let one of the older years tell you about that day. What do you think would work against one, when it has you cornered, raising its club, about to smash you into the ground?”

For a moment the students were surprised to be asked a question, then the first suggestions were called.

“A stupefy!”

“A cutting hex to its throat!”

“Petrificus totalus!”

“Have you considered that the hide of a troll is nearly as spell-resistant as a dragon's?”

Filius had to chuckle at the startled expressions on many of those that had gleefully called much more complicated spells up to the teenager standing, wand in hand, on the dais, taking in all their ideas, and throwing them over with that simple question.

“Ron knocked it out with its own club back then. With a spell we had started learning only that day. A first-year spell! *Wingardium Leviosa.* If you know your spells, can aim them properly, and are creative with those you can cast in your sleep, as often as needed, you have a better chance to get away. A much better chance than if you try to cast a more complex spell you might not pull off in the heat of the moment.”

With that, Hermione Granger and Harry Slytherin-Potter first demonstrated the spell, before they descended into the crowd, splitting it into groups, each with one older student to help, instructing them on how to cast the spell.

Filius watched the proceedings and was delighted at what he saw. The two student leaders split up groups composed of all one House or one year, mixing them up. He heard the girl explain it was to make sure they all would get to practice with different people, to learn more by having to adapt. They both were patient with explaining the right pronunciation, wand movement, and how to hold the wand.

He was glad that his intervention wasn’t needed at any time.

When the meeting broke up after over an hour, Filius walked over to the now again three teenagers, smiling. “Well done, all of you! Have you already planned what you want to do next?”
Nodding with bouncing locks, Miss Granger answered with an eager gleam in her brown eyes. “We thought about the leg-locker curse and Petrificus totalus. After that, we wanted to start on spells from each year that will likely come up in the practical exam. Do you think that there will be practical exams for the others? I mean, those not taking OWLs and NEWTs this year?”

Interrupting the flow of eager words, Filius smiled. Miss Granger’s enthusiasm was endearing. Sometimes it could be a little bit much, but most of the time he wondered why the girl hadn’t been sorted into Ravenclaw. “I’ll see if I can get the new Defence Professor to tell me how he plans to conduct the examinations. As for the OWLs and NEWTs, I’m pretty sure one of the older Ravenclaws can tell you what was asked for in the practical part of the OWL exam on Defence.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Professor.”

“And now I think it's time for you to go back to your common room. Have a good evening and sleep well.”

Three “Thank you, Professor.” was the last each of them said to him before they left. Chuckling, Filius began to set the Hall to rights again. He could have left the work for the elves, but he enjoyed manoeuvring the big tables too much to let the opportunity go by.

He was eager to see how many students would turn up to the next meeting, and what his colleagues would say about his report once he was back in the staff room. There were a few bets to settle. Sinistra had been certain he would have to break up a few fights. Pomona had held the bet and was due to get a sizeable pile of the finest Honeydukes chocolate for her win.

ooOoo

As many of the other Gryffindors had been to the Defence Club, those that had remained in the common room – those not that interested in Defence or just eager to use the opportunity of a mostly empty common room – had been filled in by the others who had returned before Ron, Hermione, and Harry.

They stayed a while, making plans for the next meeting, finishing off some last notes, and playing a few rounds of exploding snap.

Once the first- and second-years had vanished, the older years trickled up to the dorms. Harry followed the others from his year up, and got to listen to Seamus and Dean speaking about some of their female year mates.

“The Patil twins are something to look at!” Seamus said, making a motion with both of his hands as if he were trying to paint their outline into the air before him.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be adverse to taking one of them to Hogsmeade, or the Astronomy Tower.” The both of them laughed, while Neville was red as a tomato.

Ron rubbed his neck, a blush creeping up there under his hand. “Yeah, they are rather pretty. But I guess after the debacle of the Yule Ball last year, I have only a vampire’s chance in daylight to get a date with one of them.”

Harry thought his friend sounded rather put out, as if the girls were the problem here.
They said good night at the door to the fifth-year boys' dorm, where Harry made his way further up the tower to his own room.

The Ball had been a veritable failure on his part. If he had known then what he had learned this summer, it would have gone better. A lot better. For one, he actually knew how to dance now. He was not exactly comfortable yet, but he was pretty sure he wouldn’t step on the toes of his dance partner every other step. Or ignore his date the whole evening. He cringed at this thought. He had been pretty rude. His chances for another date with one of them were pretty slim.

That wasn’t really a problem, though. They might be pretty, but Harry only had asked them because he’d really needed a date, as a champion and all that. But today he had seen Cho among those attending the club meeting. He had even spoken to her for a moment, demonstrating how she could improve her grip and aim for her spellcasting. His stomach had made some odd movements while Harry was near her, not settling down into his normal nervousness even as he had moved on to help others.

Did he like her? It was possible. But would she be open to spending time with him? She was a year older… would that be a problem? Probably not a bigger one than the fact that the man who had ordered her old boyfriend's death was now Harry’s guardian. Sighing, and stripping out of his robes and clothes – placing them neatly onto a chair – Harry hurried through his nightly ablutions.

Maybe Sirius would be able to help him figure this out. He had promised the man a call on the mirror, but wished he could just take his favourite book – the one all his dorm mates had wanted to borrow – and read a while in bed.

Being a teenager on top of all the complicated crap that was his life was really not fair at all.

oooOOooo

Sonja sat on the love seat in front of the fire, her head resting on Severus’ chest, one of his arms slung around her. They were both reading different potions-related texts. The fire gave off a nice warmth in front of her, and Severus was a really nice heat-source behind her. At the moment they were researching how to make the potion he currently was working on, a little bit cheaper to produce, and have a longer shelf life. It was an interesting and quite complicated puzzle they were working on. That her wizard took her opinion as seriously as he did, made her feel really appreciated. It was much better than the patrons at the Apothecary looking down on her, pitying her for her lack of magic.

She hoped that he would invite her to stay the night. It was Friday evening, tomorrow there would be a game between the Slytherin and Gryffindor Quidditch Teams, and she would like to watch it, together with the man she would marry.

Smiling contently, Sonja snuggled a little deeper into the man sitting behind her, his legs framing her own, a warm blanket covering them to make a perfect cocoon for them on their seat.

Severus laid a kiss to her hair at the back of her head, inhaling before he burrowed his nose in her hair. “Do you want some more wine, love?” he asked her, placing his book on the small side table, to take up his wand that had been resting there.

She nodded, humming, turning a page.
Before he could levitate the pitcher over to them, though, someone knocked at the door to his quarters. Severus gave a sigh and Sonja started to peel the blanket off so she could get up to make the way free for Severus to see who wanted to speak to him. The annoying – knowing – twinkle in the Headmaster’s eyes as Severus and she had passed through the man’s office made her guess that at least he wasn’t likely to show up at Severus’ door.

Finally they had managed to de-tangle themselves from each other, and Severus walked over to the door, opening it just at the moment another knock sounded.

Sonja folded the blanket and sat down again. She was going to be a part of Severus’ life, so she wasn’t going to hide away.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Professor,” a blond teenage boy in Slytherin robes addressed his Head of House. “But one of the first-years is panicking over a letter that was waiting in the dorm when we all came back from the Defence Club. She’s inconsolable. Pansy is out of ideas, so I came here to ask for your help, Professor.”

“Wait a moment, Mr. Malfoy,” Severus said before he walked back to Sonja, bending down to give her a kiss. “I hope it won’t take long, Sonja. So please make yourself comfortable.” He grabbed his outer robes from the back of the love seat, slipping it on.

“I will be here when you return, Severus.” She smiled up at him, ignoring the boy standing in the door.

They exchanged another kiss, before Severus vanished to help calm down a student, leaving her in his rooms, with a pitcher of excellent red wine and a plate of tasty cheese.

This promised to become a really nice evening.

Chapter End Notes

I know that de-aging is an often-used concept in many fan-fiction stories. But I feel that if there was a reliable way to de-age whenever you chose, it would have a not-insignificant impact on the wizarding world. Aging Potion is mentioned in canon, de-aging is not. As far as I know. (Neville's Trevor was subjected to a shrinking solution that made him into a tadpole again. I looked it up ;) )

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
And for farawisa's help in keeping the facts straight.

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Now this story will be updated together with its counterpart over at FFnet. Every other Friday. The date I have planned to update the next chapter will appear at the end of each chapter in the comments section. And now that we are caught up here all comments you make, questions and speculations you share with me, wishes you leave behind will influence were the story goes next. I have a goal in mind and a few milestones on the way, but where something will happen, from whose point of view I will tell, and on which parts I put the focus, all that is influenced by you my dear readers! So have fun reading and let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday the 4th of November

Coming out of the bathroom – her hair still a bit damp – Sonja found Severus standing in his bedroom, already in his severe teaching robes. Either he was a morning person, or he simply had learned in over a decade of teaching to make the best of his early mornings. She smiled at the thought that she would learn which was true in due time.

Severus answered her smile with a small one of his own, stepping up to her for another sweet kiss. “Do you want me to dry your hair?” he asked, brushing some of the wet strands from her forehead.

Considering the offer, and remembering all the times she had heard witches complaining that their hair was untameable after using a drying charm on them, she was curious what her hair would do. “Yes, please, Severus.”

With a flourish of his dark wand, her hair dried. It didn’t feel any different from the way it did when she let it dry normally, but she would see how it behaved the rest of the day. Snatching up her robe from the bed and quickly slipping her arms into the sleeves, she was ready to go.

Checking herself over in a mirror on the door of the wardrobe, Sonja decided that she looked respectable enough to brave the Great Hall for breakfast.

“Before we go and face the dunderheads during breakfast before a Quidditch game, I wanted to give this to you,” Severus said as Sonja turned to face him. He was holding a golden chain with a pendant looking like a small bouquet of summer flowers.

With a few steps she was by his side, and turned around so he could place the chain around her neck and close the clasps. “This is an emergency portkey that will take you to my house. Now that your association with me will be common knowledge in short time, and you are at a disadvantage, I organized this as a way for you to get to safety if someone should try to take out their irritation with me on you.”

Softly Sonja smoothed out a worry line between Severus’ brows. “I’ll be careful. It’s not as if I only
now started to live as a person without magic among those that can use it.” To change the topic of conversation over to a lighter one, she played with the pendant – it looked like it had been done with colourful enamel on a silver base – and asked, “How did you manage to get it? I always had the impression that the Ministry tends to be reluctant to let people carry around portkeys all the time.”

Opening the door for her, and following her into the corridor, Severus gave her a short explanation. “Lord Slytherin was kind enough to help the process along. He informed me that he would be honoured to make your acquaintance. As far as I know, he plans to be here for the game.”

The rest of the short way up to the Great Hall, the two lovers talked about the upcoming game between Severus’ House and the Gryffindors. And the Squib asked what the visit of yesterday evening had been about. With an exasperated eye-roll Severus explained that the girl had gotten a letter from home telling about a missing cat which the girl loved dearly. A simple floo call had cleared the problem up. Between the moment the letter had been send and the time they had called the cat had come back. Agreeing with Severus that it was foolish to send such a letter and not contact the child the moment they knew the concern was unwarranted.

Sonja was looking forward to the first game of Quidditch she would get to see. And for breakfast in the Great Hall.

ooOoo

Minerva looked up from her discussion with Filius over the possible tactical shifts in the new teams they had this year. Some older players had graduated last year and now had to be replaced, shaking up the tactics the teams had developed over the last few years. For instance, Gryffindor had a new captain, and Minerva was curious how the girl had managed to integrate the new keeper into the team.

Looking over the students, as she did every few moments so she would spot brewing trouble as early as possible, to prevent trouble, she spotted Severus walk in with a woman at his side. The two were in a lively discussion, and the almost-smile and the life in the dark eyes of her colleague, were something she hadn’t seen for far too long.

Not really paying attention to the animatedly speaking Charms Professor, Minerva cast her thoughts back many years on a quest to remember when Severus last had seemed so carefree. A wave of regret swept through her as she realized that it had been with Lily at his side in the library, studying, that she had last seen him so happy.

Finally Severus and the young woman had reached the table at the front of the Hall, all professors and quite a few students looking at them.

Ignoring the curious students, Severus helped the woman at his side to climb the steps – what an uncharacteristically chivalrous action on the Potions Master’s part! – and turned to the side so he could easily turn to the table and his companion.

“Sonja, these are my colleagues. Filius Flitwick, Minerva McGonagall, Pomona Sprout…” he named them all in the order they were seated at the table this morning. They certainly had preferred places, but they changed now and again so they didn't always sit next to the same people.
“This is my fiancée, Sonja Jiggers.”

The woman in her simple but flattering robes, smiled. “It’s nice to meet you all. I’m sure we will get to know each other well soon.”

Soon Minerva and the others got over their shock and started to ask questions. Like the others – at least she thought they wanted to know the same – Minerva wondered where Miss Jiggers had gone to school. So she simply asked. “Where have you gone to school, Miss Jiggers? I would remember if you had attended Hogwarts.” She smiled and was happy to see an equally happy smile on the young woman’s face, as she filled her own plate with different fruits, offering a plate of bacon to Severus.

“Not sure if you would have heard of the school, or the university I attended. As I’m a Squib, I never went to a magical school. Father now is really happy he encouraged me to study economics. The Apothecary is doing better than ever.” The disarming smile on her face was somewhat of a conundrum for Minerva. Someone who only regularly interacted with one Squib – Argus Filch – who was bitter about his lack of magic, wouldn’t expect a Squib to be happy among those able to wield magic.

“And now that Severus has come into my life, I actually get to take part in one of the few places where a person without magic can contribute. “I love discussing potions with you.” At the end of her sentence, she had turned to Severus, smirking slightly in his direction.

Minerva had to blink to make sure that she was not imagining things. Severus was smiling back. True, it was a little lopsided and barely visible. But the young wizard the Transfiguration Professor only knew as a withdrawn teenager, and later a dour man, simply didn’t smile for just anyone!

And then her eyes fell on Dumbledore sitting in his chair in the middle of the table. She knew from experience that one could hear every normal conversation taking place at the table from there. So he must have heard. So why were his features seemingly frozen in an expression of shock? Hadn’t he known that Miss Jiggers was a Squib? Didn’t he approve of a Squib marrying one of his employees?

The lively conversation around her, her need to get to know this woman capable of making Severus smile, quickly made her banish her wonder over the Headmaster’s behaviour to the back of her mind. She would have time enough after the game to analyse what she might have seen.

ooOoo

Slipping into a warm woollen vest, Marvolo finished dressing for sitting in the stands for however long it would take for one of the Seekers to catch the snitch. Nagini was basking near the fireplace, coiled on the rug. She tended to be exceptionally lazy in the colder months of the year.

.:Where are you going?:. she hissed sleepily from her place.

.:I will visit Henry at school. Watch him playing Quidditch:. Marvolo answered, slipping into his robes before he pointed his wand at one of his favourite scarves, charming it to sport both Gryffindor and Slytherin Team Colours.

.:What’s that, Quidditch? Is it fun?:. The snake’s head rose from the heap of her body, turning
so Marvolo was in her field of vision. She regarded him patiently. Or so he assumed. It wasn’t easy to interpret a snake’s moods by its limited – and that was a generous exaggeration – facial expressions and body language.

::I like watching. And Henry likes to play. So, yes, it’s fun::. Should he take a hat? The weather that far up north could be rather cold in November. It probably would be wise to take along a hat and mittens. He didn’t like to be cold. Too many bad memories. He summoned both items from one corner of the big wardrobe.

::But what is it::. the snake persisted. Marvolo smirked, tucking both hat and mittens into one of the robe pockets. His familiar could be incredibly stubborn sometimes. And once she understood to her own satisfaction she tended to not care any longer. In a way she had a similar character to his own. He loved researching obscure magic, but once he understood it, he rarely did anything with it.

For a moment he contemplated how to explain the intricate nature of Quidditch to a snake. He never would manage to explain the game in its entirety in the time he had. So, maybe it would be enough to explain Henry’s part of the game. ::It is a little like hunting birds. Henry flies through the sky trying to catch a little bird before the seeker of the other team gets it::.

Settling back into her comfortable coil Nagini hissed a reply, already no longer interested.

::Birds always mock me from the branches of the trees. I don’t like birds. But I wonder how they would taste::.

Laughing softly, Marvolo made his way out of the house, to apparate to the borders of Hogwarts’ grounds. Time to be the charming father of the Gryffindor Seeker.

ooOoo

Harry and Ron walked down the path to the locker rooms together with the other team members. Ron was pale with nervousness, shaking, and Harry tried to calm him down as he spotted two figures coming up the path from the village.

“Ron, look over there!” Harry pointed to the two in an effort to distract his friend. Ron was a good keeper, but only when he wasn’t thinking so much. Sadly, the prospect of playing in front of the whole school made him think, dreaming up nightmarish reactions of the other Gryffindors and his family to the failure he expected to be.

Ron turned, squinting to see better. “Who are they?”

Harry had a pretty good idea who they were. One was walking with a little spring in his step, looking around like someone enjoying himself immensely. The other was as tall as the one walking by his side. But in contrast to the first man’s easy going demeanour, he was walking rigidly, his arms swinging stiffly by his sides. Like he had to control himself to keep calm.

As family attending Quidditch matches at the school was not a common occurrence, it was quite possible that the two men walking up towards them were Sirius and Marvolo. Considering the really good acting Marvolo had proved to be capable of, and the fact that Sirius barely tolerated the other man… Soon they were near enough to one another that it was obvious that Harry’s guess had been spot on.
“Henry!” Marvolo called out, waving his arm to make sure Harry could spot them. He felt a smile curl his lips, they both had come, just as they had promised they would. It was really nice to have two adults interested in just him, and keeping their promises.

He waved back, the broom over his other shoulder wobbling with the motion.

A few moments later the team and the two adults met on the path. While the girls and the twins continued to the locker room, Harry walked slowly between the two wizards, Ron uncertainly hovering by his friend’s side.

“You can go follow the others, Ron. I'll be there soon.” It was nice that his red-haired friend was concerned for his safety, and at the same time annoying that he suspected that Harry wasn’t safe here after all Harry had told him.

With a reluctant nod Ron hurried to catch up to the others.

Turning to Marvolo, Harry grinned. “So you decided to go with both colours!” Sirius looked startled for a moment and then got a surprised expression.

“You are wearing both Gryffindor and Slytherin colours! And I thought the conflict of interests would force you to remain neutral, Lord Slytherin,” Sirius drawled, rearranging the Gryffindor coloured scarf and hat he was wearing.

Marvolo laughed. “Well, I hope for a re-enactment of the last World Cup.”

For a moment Harry was bewildered before he grinned. “You know that’s highly unlikely, don’t you, sir? Our chasers are really good and have played together for years.”

The older wizard laughed again. “Well, I said I hope for this outcome, but I know it is unlikely. So do your best and catch the snitch. I will cheer on the Slytherin chasers, so they will make so many points with goals that Slytherin still will win.”

They were rapidly approaching the point where the way to the stands separated from the way to the changing rooms.

“Well, I will cheer for the whole team of Gryffindor,” Sirius declared, giving a nasty look to Harry’s guardian, who only chuckled. “And I think I will sit with your friends, Harry. Be careful, pup, and see that you win!”

Harry grinned and nodded. He would do that. Sirius gave him a hug, and Marvolo gave him a squeeze to the shoulder. More contact than they had ever shared, if they didn’t count the hug Harry had enveloped the man in after the horrible disaster of the Inferi cave.

With a warm glow inside his chest, Harry walked the last part down to the changing rooms. Both Sirius and Marvolo were here to cheer him on. It felt good to finally have a family. With a little luck the rest of the world would soon accept that Marvolo wasn’t Voldemort any longer. Or at least Harry hoped he wasn’t, because it seemed like a good idea to give the man a second chance for real. He might still have his followers. But what was the difference between them and the people following Dumbledore’s lead? Both groups were working to realize their political goals. They had really different ideas on what was the best for their world – and Harry was pretty sure there were things on both sides he could agree to, as well as things he couldn’t – but it seemed that they now had the same methods to work towards their goals.

Banishing politics from his mind, Harry entered the locker room to prepare for his first game in over a year. He had so missed this!
Albus sat down between the other professors, deep in thought and listening to the polite conversation between Severus, his fiancée, and Tom. How was it possible that he had so miscalculated? Severus had told him that Tom approved of his choice of partner. But the girl was a Squib. How was it possible that Tom, who despised anyone weak, could accept someone incapable of using magic as the spouse of one of his followers? How could it happen that he had so badly miscalculated?

All the teachers, and what looked like most of the students, had come to watch this game. Their excitement was evident in the level of noise all around him. One of the students even had constructed a lion-head hat which roared now and then from the top of the girl's head. He was pretty sure he had seen her demonstrating the hat during breakfast in the Great Hall.

The ingenuity of some students always managed to make his days brighter. And the young dreamy Ravenclaw was one of the students who made his days brighter.

But his thought soon circled back to the conundrum of Tom willingly associating with Squibs. Encouraging his followers to interact with Squibs. Trying to integrate them into magical society when they would certainly feel inferior, surrounded by a power they were unable to access, ever. Petunia Evans once had asked to be allowed to go to Hogwarts together with her sister. A request Albus had seen more than once, and as he always had done, he had bestowed upon her the kindness of turning her away. It was a bitter life to live surrounded by magic, never to truly touch it.

Could it be possible that Tom had information – crucial information – Albus was missing?

“Hey, come over here!” Sirius shouted out to his godson's friends. Hermione spotted him first, and promptly changed direction. The Longbottom boy was following in her wake, a blonde girl with enormous blue eyes – looking surprised – and a big lion head on her head sat down beside them with a dreamy smile.

“Lord Black, how nice of you to come!” the bushy-haired witch greeted Sirius, sitting down on the bench and casting a warming charm. The day was clear, but chilly.

“No, please don’t! I know it’s customary to address a Lord or Lady with the title they carry, but you're Harry’s friend. And I don’t really put much stock in those stifling traditions. So, please, in such an informal setting, call me Sirius.” He looked over the other teens, and smiled. “That goes for you too! Sit, sit. I have chocolate here, want a piece?”

They shared in the bars of fine Honeydukes chocolate, and chatted about different topics, from schoolwork to school gossip, until the game finally began.

“Hello, everyone, and welcome to the first game at Hogwarts since the last year, when our favourite sport had to give way for the Tri-Wizard Tournament! And here come the teams: Gryffindor, with new Captain Angelina Johnson – such a good-looking girl – and new Keeper Ron
Weasley, brother of the two Human Bludgers Fred and George, as well as our youngest seeker in several hundred years, and the two other Chaser girls, Alicia Spinnet and Katie Bell. And Slytherin, with Captain Montague, his fellow Chasers Warrington and Pucey, Seeker Draco Malfoy, and the new Beaters Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. Let’s hope for a clean and exciting game!”

“Who’s the guy commenting?” Sirius asked, amused by the overly enthusiastic boy, commenting the game with flowery words. If he kept this up, the game would be even more fun.

“And there are the players, the captains are shaking hands. And off they go! Madame Hooch has released the snitch! The game is on!”

Cheers went up all around the pitch, blocks of House Colours moving with the cheering.

Only listening with half an ear, Sirius followed Harry’s circles around the pitch with his eyes. The three chasers of Gryffindor were an excellent team. It was obvious that they had played together for years. But the Bletchley boy was a seasoned keeper. Ron was a nice kid, and a good friend – as far as Sirius could tell – but he was lacking the practice and experience he would need to play at his best. For each goal the excellent chasers of Gryffindor scored, Ron failed to keep his hoops clean of the quaffle.

One of the Gryffindor boys sitting near to him groaned. “If that keeps up, the snitch will decide the game!”

And as far as Sirius could tell, that was exactly what was going to happen. Ron wasn’t really confident on a broom as keeper, but the Slytherin chasers were no match for the three Gryffindor girls.

The whole block of students in Gryffindor robes and with red-gold coloured scarves, hats, and banners, jumped up as one of the twins almost managed to knock a Slytherin chaser off his broom with a bludger.

“That was a close call! Good work from the Weasley twins! They have more than a talent for pranks, folks!”

The voice of the commentator continued to fill the pitch, exclaiming with every interesting move the players made.

When it stood 40 to 40, after some near-misses of the grandiose trio against the Slytherin keeper, and some barely prevented goals by the Slytherin chasers, Lee Jordan’s voice echoed loud and clear. “Was that the snitch?”

Sirius jumped to his feed, his eyes glued to the two small figures making daring manoeuvres at a breakneck speed. One was wearing the red and gold of Gryffindor, his black hair easily spotted, the other was wrapped in the silver and green of Slytherin, his blond hair a bright spot against the dreary sky.

From his tense grip on the rail before him, Sirius’ knuckles were going white. He gasped as both seekers suddenly swerved to the right, putting the Malfoy kid nearer to the snitch, as he had been on the right of Harry, suddenly they both dove down towards the ground – making Sirius’ old heart stutter for a moment – before suddenly changing direction again, shooting up into the sky. Harry had the faster broom and made a tighter turn, getting ahead of the other boy, now again in a better position.
Then Harry levelled his broom out, holding one hand formed into a fist high over his head. “He has the snitch! Potter… the Gryffindor Seeker has caught the snitch! The first game of the year finishes with 60 Slytherin to 190 Gryffindor! Gryffindor wins!”

All around the lone adult wizard, teenagers were dancing, cheering, and chanting. Gryffindor had won!

With shaking knees Sirius sat back down, ignoring the celebrating students around him. For the first time he really understood how James’ mum had felt when she had found the two of them one summer making insane stunts on their brooms in the orchard behind the manor. She had banished the brooms to the house and they hadn’t seen them again for the rest of those holidays at all. If those stunts had looked anything like the moves he had seen Harry make just now, he was actually quite surprised that good old Dorea had been so lenient. Here Harry had had Madame Hooch and the other professors to help if anything went wrong. But James and himself hadn’t even told anyone where they had gone.

Maybe he should just adopt someone already over the age of twenty to have an heir, and forego the whole terrifying experience of being an actual parent. He wasn’t really that interested in settling down, after all, and he wanted to live, not die of shock because his kid was reckless.

ooOoo

“I still think we should have gone with the idea of targeting the Weasel’s weakness. You all have seen what a weak keeper he is. If we played on his insecurities…”

Draco rolled his eyes. Montague had belaboured the point many times by now.

“Yeah,” Bletchley said, muffled by the towel he used to dry his hair – Draco had seen once what his hair did when dried with a charm, it was a wise decision to take the longer road – looking up. “The song you came up with was pretty good. Had a tune to it!”

Draco shook his head. Was it really so hard to understand? “You really want to see what the … what Lord Slytherin might do if we tried something like this against a friend of his son? I would really prefer to never know what he might do. No, we have to work on our chaser formations. And you two need to have a better overview where a bludger would do the most good. Just randomly smacking it at the other team isn’t going to work.”

Before one of his… friends… could come up with a reaction, Montague interrupted Draco’s lecture. “Who made you captain, Malfoy?”

There wasn’t much the blond could say to that, so he shrugged. “Just some thoughts,” he replied before he went into the shower. He wanted to warm up under the hot water before they made their way back to the castle. Maybe it would have worked, sabotaging the red-head with the song he had written one evening as a little fun he used to avoid working on his history essay, but he was pretty sure it wasn’t worth the risk.

And being polite with Slytherin’s friends seemed to work. Never before had the other seeker come over to shake his hand after a match with so genuine a smile. Winning would have been better, but getting thanked for a good game was worth something, too.
“Well done, son!” Harry turned to the man who had spoken, grinning like mad. It had been wonderful to play a real game of Quidditch again. And they had won! Sure, Ron still needed a lot more confidence, but Angelina and the other girls were almost unstoppable.

“Thank you, sir!” He probably looked a little like a loon, with his face-splitting grin, windswept hair, sweaty Quidditch uniform, and a broom over his shoulder. The others from the team were drifting over to the locker rooms to shower and change, the students drifting up towards the castle, as it was getting darker, with heavy clouds moving up from the south.

“I wish I could stay and celebrate with you. But I guess it will be a Gryffindor-only party?” That got a few people in the vicinity laughing, among them Professor Flitwick and Sirius. “Have fun at your party. You have earned it.”

Not really knowing why he said it – and later berating himself while he stood under the heavenly warm water – Harry cheekily tugged at the scarf divided down its middle between the two teams’ colours. “But whatever the outcome of the game would have been, you were guaranteed a reason to celebrate.”

With a small smirk, the slightly taller man nodded his head. “That is true, Henry.” Then he switched to Parseltongue.:I have an appointment with a mind healer. I have heard it helps one to cope with irrational fears and big changes:.

Several people shuddered, or got paler once the hissing started. It was funny how snakes never really made much noise, but the tones of Parseltongue were so easily heard by those not able to understand them.

.:You will call tonight?:. Harry hissed his question back, getting a nod in answer, and then quickly departed to change. It was getting cold standing out here in the light drizzle now falling from the sky. A hot shower sounded like exactly the thing he needed right now.

oooOOooo

He was really nervous. How ridiculous was that? And if he hadn’t told his son that he was going to meet with Healer Goyle, he would have moved the appointment. Again. Because this was the third attempt to actually start to work with the woman to get his… feelings sorted out.

He so wished he could just skip this. It felt like weakness, what he was doing. Having feelings at all, caring for others… but avoiding those had gotten him into the trouble he had been in, the trouble he hadn’t really left behind – yet – so doing it again and hoping for a different result would be foolish.

Once he had made his way to her office, he got the new loophole-free secrecy contract out of his robes, and sat down while the woman read the rather large stack of parchment sheets.

Looking around, Marvolo realized that he was rather skittish, and that it was very likely that there would come topics on the table he rather would not speak about.
With a sigh he plucked a tissue paper from a box offering them – probably to be used by patients crying – and waved his wand at it, transfiguring it into a box. A box made out of fine-grained dark wood, a lid attached with brass hinges, and a mechanism to open the box that could be called complicated. Another tissue was transformed into a velvet lining. All these things finished, Marvolo placed the lining into the box, reverently placed his wand on top, and then closed the mechanism. Finally he placed the box outside his easy reach, but still in his line of sight.

“What are you doing, Lord Slytherin?” the Healer asked, placing the quill she had used to sign the contract down on top of the stack.

“Making sure that my temper will not cause your early demise just because I slip in control. This way it will take some time to regain my easiest way of killing you. Hopefully enough to regain my senses and calm down.” Marvolo answered, working hard to keep a moderately calm exterior. It was harder than it had any right to be.

“I thank you for your consideration and foresight,” was the Squib’s calm and collected reaction, while she sat back, a notebook and pencil in hand, her blouse and skirt surrounding her in an aura of professionalism. She was calmer than most people would be in the face of a man so casually mentioning his inclination to kill when upset.

But maybe she had known exactly what she was getting into when she agreed to take him on as a patient. Her nephew was one of his Death Eaters, and she had made a study of the human mind, it was a logical conclusion that she would be prepared.

“You said that you want my help to deal with feelings you do not understand, and find better ways to react to urges new to you?” Her pen was poised for taking notes, and Marvolo was staring at it with dread. Giving trust and control to someone other than himself was hard. Maybe even impossible… maybe he should start with something small.

“That is what I said,” Marvolo agreed reluctantly. He had said as much, but now he wasn’t so sure anymore. “But I think… we might need to start with something… different.” When he had been younger Marvolo had read many works on the human mind and what one might use to manipulate it. And while researching ways to help Henry deal with the trauma he had experienced, he had read up on the newest developments in the field. He knew what the theory said what was needed to help with... problems like his. He was rather reluctant to acknowledge that he had a problem. But the fact was that he was better able to plan, had better control over his magic, and could do more before feeling tired. All hints he had found after his return pointed in the direction of that one conclusion.

How averse to admitting it he might be notwithstanding.

“Currently I experience urges to torture people that frustrate me. I have used duelling practice and conjured objects I let explode to calm the need for destruction. Do you have other suggestions?” He balled his hands into fists, breathing deliberately to remain calm, intent on remaining in control of not only the situation, but himself as well.

“Redirecting violent urges into destroying inanimate objects is a good solution. You might consider other physical activities to get the energy out of your system. Weeding a garden, felling a tree, running… I suggest trying different methods to find those that work the best for you, Lord Slytherin.”

Marvolo nodded, called the box with his wand to his hand, opened the mechanism, and took his wand back. “Thank you, Madame Goyle. I will contact you again for the next appointment.”
He walked out of the office rather quickly, leaving the box behind. That wasn’t what he had wished to accomplish, but in a way it was a start. Everything he had read about it indicated that therapy wasn’t an easy process, and he was doubtful if it was possible for him to give the trust needed to receive help.

He apparated home, intending to get some more planning done. Probably pushed by his vows to be working for the good of their community and his loyal vassals. But whatever the reason for his motivation and energy, he would take full advantage of it.

oooOOooo

After dinner, the victory party in the Gryffindor common room really kicked off.

The twins had managed to get pastries, butterbeer, pumpkin juice, and the funnier of their joke products in great quantities, giving their party-catering a decent base. All of the House had added some of their own sweets to the buffet, so now there was quite a feast to be had. Decorations from past festivities – stashed somewhere around the tower until they were needed again – hung from every possible place on the walls and furniture, giving the right atmosphere.

In several corners, some of the older students were cuddling, snogging, and maybe more, mostly ignored by those around them.

Harry sat among his team mates and friends, smiling and just feeling light for once. In a way, this year had been harder than those before so far, but at the same time he had had more adult support than ever before as well.

And now while singing songs, making jokes, and eating some of his favourite foods, there was a small flicker of hope growing that the other Gryffindors might accept that a Parselmouth could be a lion like them, that the family name of Slytherin didn’t automatically made him into an untrustworthy, backstabbing dark wizard. The camaraderie and generally relaxed atmosphere indicated that it just might be possible.

Sadly, Harry didn’t notice the blazing glare sent his way from the other side of the room, where a sulking girl sat, making her friends happy that she seemingly was on her way to feeling better, finally.

oooOOooo

Really late that Saturday evening, Severus found himself sitting in the Dark Lord’s study, a small tumbler of good scotch whiskey in hand. The Potions Master was curious what this meeting was about, and quite happy to not be at the school at the moment. His Slytherins would be bemoaning their loss at Quidditch against Gryffindor, so he was glad for the distraction.

The man sitting behind the desk had a pensive expression on his face, his red eyes unfocused. Suddenly he started to speak, still staring off into the distance. “What is your view on de-aging potions, Severus?”
One dark brow rose slightly in interest. That was a most controversial topic. Disregarding the ideas springing up in his mind of why his Lord had chosen this particular topic, Severus took a sip from his drink before starting on somewhat of a rant. “As most do at some point, I studied what is known about the theory behind de-aging, while I worked for my Mastery. I, personally, feel it is an unattainable goal.” He made a small waving gesture with his empty hand. “The costs to counterbalance the gain are simply too high. If we assume that de-aging is successfully attained when the witch or wizard regresses in body and mind back to a younger, former version of themselves, ageing after that like any normal human would, then some accidents in potions development have caused true de-aging. But,” he couldn’t help the sneer crossing his face, and noted the amused glint in his Lord’s eyes over his passionate speech, “the side effects of these successful instances have been severe indeed.”

A questioning look and a wave of the slim hand, prompted the Potions Master to continue. “Blindness, deafness, infertility, loss of all memories, loss of magic… I could go on for a while. Some of those that did survive the initial change killed themselves after a few years because of depression-like states that couldn’t be treated with potions. They never were happy. About anything. I feel that the gained additional years of life are balanced out by a cost equalling that gain.” For a moment Severus gazed into his tumbler, swirling the amber-coloured liquid. “I quickly came to the conclusion that the price was too high, and directed my interests elsewhere.”

“So you claim that all potions have a cost counterbalancing the gain we get from their use?” The Dark Lord sounded a little sceptical, but clearly was willing to listen to Severus’ explanation.

So, Severus nodded. “I do, my Lord. For most potions, it is the time needed to brew them. The more powerful potions take months to brew. Another part of the costs are the ingredients. Some are rare, or dangerous to work with, or even to get access to. One error in the process can be deadly, or at least cost all that already went into it, making high levels of skill necessary for success. In a way, brewing a potion resembles the workings of a ritual, channelling the magic to combine the aspects of the ingredients to achieve the desired goal.”

A contemplative silence descended onto the room. Severus sipped his drink, glancing in the direction of the Dark Lord, who was obviously deep in thought.

“How would you go about passing a wizard off as his own son if you had to?” The question was stated quite innocently, but Severus had to employ his Occlumency to keep himself from snorting. However it was phrased, there was an order hidden in there.

He quickly went over what might work, before he assembled something that maybe could be called a plan. “I would probably go with a shrinking solution to shrink the person to a size to match the age aimed for, and later use the counter-potion in carefully measured and calculated doses to make it seem as if the person does age and grow.”

The Dark Lord leaned forward in his seat, steeping his fingers under his chin, his elbows resting on the leather surface of the desk. He frowned. “I remember quite distinctly, Professor Slughorn testing the classes’ potions on a few potted plants. They simply shrank in size but remained adult plants, just in miniature.”

Severus nodded. “It is the only remaining legal use of the potion. It affects plants and animals, as well as humans, quite differently. While it shrinks plants and let’s them keep their mature appearance, it makes animals – mammals, fish, amphibians, and so on – appear younger. Once it was used to keep pets in their cute infant stages until they died of old age.” Even if he found little kittens and puppies cute, he never would say it out loud. The appearance aimed to trigger caring instincts in adults of their species worked on him as well. There was no shame in that. “Now it is
“Clearly this was some potions trivia the Dark Lord never had bothered to learn. And who would blame him? It truly was not something that factored into conquering the country. Or so Severus had thought.

“That sounds like a workable idea. Please write up a plan of how long preparations would take, ingredients needed, and everything else, if you would have to apply this to two men aged in their mid-thirties, changing them to no younger than twelve. I also want you to research rituals that can be used to adopt an adult, or change their appearance to match other parents than the one they really had…” It was clear that his Lord was unhappy that he didn’t know a more precise way to describe what he wanted.

Bowing his head, accepting his new mission, Severus clarified the order to make sure he had gathered the important points correctly. “I will make a plan of dosage and preparation for the shrinking solution and its antidote. And I will research rituals and potions to change an adult’s parentage, I assume for someone in their thirties?”

“That is correct. You might use the library here in the house. If you require a text you can’t find here, in your own collection, or in those of the other Death Eaters, inform me and I will endeavour to acquire it.”

It was early in the morning of Sunday before Severus got back to the school. He was called to the Headmaster’s office by the man’s Patronus to report before he had managed to get to his quarters. Carefully checking his Occlumency shields and recalling what he would tell the Headmaster about the prolonged meeting with the Dark Lord, Severus prepared on the way.

The Dark Lord’s wish to know every bit that Severus could tell him about what Mr. Slytherin was doing at school, reports on other children and what the Order was doing, as well as more tutoring-session plans for over the Christmas holiday, and the excuse of potions to identify burned human remains, would be enough to explain the long meeting.

Hopefully.

With a sigh the Potions Master walked the deserted hallways, watched by a few sleepy portraits, up to the Headmaster’s office, opposite to the direction he wished to take.

ooooOOooo

In the dark common room of Gryffindor Tower, a girl crept down the stairs from the girls' dorm, wand lit with a lumos, casting dancing shadows over the remains of the party that had finally ended almost an hour ago. It had been rather easy to stay awake behind the curtains of her bed with the anticipation and anger coursing through her.

How could they all celebrate that traitor for catching the snitch? It was all too clear that he had no pride in Gryffindor at all. Shaking hands with those slimy snakes, as if they were worth more than the mud the pitch had turned to under all the student’s feet.

She carefully stepped over an upturned old chair, reaching the bottom of the stairs up to the boys’ dorms. She knew that his rooms were at the very top. Even higher up than the rooms used by the Head Boy, if he was a Gryffindor. What a ridiculous thing. As if he was better than everyone else.
She snorted and started to ascend the stairs. She had practiced the spell she wanted to use on Friday evening, while all the others had been down in the Great Hall, listening to the poisoned tongue of the boy who had ripped her love from her.

Cormac had written a letter that his father had not managed to deflect the unfair, unfounded accusations. But at least her one and only love wouldn’t have to go to Azkaban. But he wouldn’t return to Hogwarts either. He had told her that he would go to one of the smaller schools over on the continent. Her love had tried to let it sound as if it had been his decision, but... she just knew that the slander had made the other school decline his request to attend lessons there.

But he would be really proud of her once he heard what she was about to do.

Finally she had reached a place where there was a kind of prickly feeling on her skin, just before she would come in actual contact with the wards. She would place her spell here, and then watch in the morning what the effect would be. There was no way that the snooty prat would look and notice before he tripped the spell. He would get his punishment for all that he had done to destroy her life.

oooOOooo

It was early in the morning, and Harry couldn’t sleep anymore. It was too early for his friends to be awake, and he just couldn’t stay in bed. He felt restless. So he got out of his bed and into his new warm clothing. It felt wonderful wearing trousers and a shirt that actually fit, shoes not held together with tape and wishing, a jumper without holes. It felt so good to finally have an adult caring for the most basic of things. Sometimes he just caressed the softness of his clothes, remembering how the Dursleys always had claimed that he was a burden and they were providing even more than they should for him.

With an abrupt motion Harry turned to take his warm cloak from its peg by the door and opened it. He would take a stroll over the grounds – maybe to the greenhouses or the lake – to calm down a little before he went to eat something for breakfast. After that he might be in the right frame of mind to start on his homework. Or plan the next Defence Club meeting. It had been cool how many had come. Harry wanted to help them all, and didn’t want to disappoint Hermione.

Slowly walking down the steps around the tower, Harry checked that he had his mittens and hat. It would be rather cold outside, after all, it still was dark, not a hint of dawn to see. Looking up – satisfied that he had everything to stay warm while taking a walk – Harry caught a peek of the door to the currently empty-standing Headboy's room, when his foot caught on something, the boy lost his footing and fell forwards.

Caught off guard, falling too fast to get out his wand to cast some charm, some spell, Harry tried to break his fall with his arms outstretched before him. His hands collided with the stairs, pain travelling up his arms, the sickening crunch of breaking bones vibrating through his body. Harry curled into a ball, cursing in his mind, before his tumbling down the circular stairs caused his head to ring and spin so badly that he no longer could think straight.

ooOoo
Fred lay awake in his bed, studying the canopy of it, puzzling over a problem with their portable swamp plan. The last test they had made was just a little too watery, where the one before that had been a little too close to porridge. The consistency they were aiming for and the plants that should grow at the edges were not quite right just yet.

While he thought about a way to counter the poisonous effect of the one ingredient that ensured the perfect consistence, he heard a muffled cry followed by something heavy falling down the stairs outside their dorm. He knew that sound because George and he had thrown their trunks and those of their dorm mates down the very same stairs some years earlier. But at this time of day, paired with the cry, it was highly unlikely to have been someone having fun.

He bolted out of his bed – barely managing to not get tangled into his deep red bed curtains – and came face-to-face with his frantic but still sleepy-looking brother. They didn’t need to say a word, and stormed out of the room without slipping on their bathrobes or slippers, only making sure that they had their wands with them.

It didn’t take them long to get to the common room, finding a crumbled form unmoving on the floor at the foot of the stairs. Fred rushed forward, wondering who of the other Gryffindor boys had managed to get up so early and then managed to fall down the stairs. Before he had even checked who it was, he heard his brother hurry up the stairs. They needed Madame Pomfrey, and only a prefect could use the floo to inform a teacher and the medi-witch.

With a steady hand – experimenting for the development of their products had hardened him somewhat against accidents – the twin moved the fabric of a high quality cloak away from the head and face of the boy. He gasped and quickly checked for a heartbeat when he saw it was Harry. Why would their Seeker lose his footing? He was one of the least clumsy people he knew. Not daring to move the younger boy, Fred just sat there helplessly, listening to thumping feet on the stairs. Help was coming.

ooOoo

Minerva watched with a really bad feeling about this accident while Poppy moved the body of Harry Potter – she might have to call him Slytherin in class, but he would always be the son of James and Lily for her – out of the Gryffindor Common room. Something felt fishy about the whole thing. But now was not the time to chase after a mouse like that.

Getting out her wand, Minerva conjured her patronus. “Severus, Mr. Slytherin fell down the stairs and is unconscious. Poppy is taking him to the hospital wing. I think you are the better choice to inform his guardian.” Her silvery cat patronus vanished through the floor on the most direct way to the Potions Master and resident spy.

Despite his prickly exterior, Minerva had come to appreciate the dry wit and sarcasm of her younger colleague. As a spy in the ranks of the Death Eaters, it was his job to keep his cover by providing useful information. If she was able to help keep him safe with something that would have to be told anyway, she would do so without thinking twice.

After that was finished, the Head of House Gryffindor turned with a flaring tartan night robe to face the gathered students. Addressing the prefects, she gave orders to the whole House. “Make
sure that no one goes up to where Mr. Slytherin likely faltered on the steps. Prepare for Aurors to come by and take your statements. I will arrange for breakfast to be delivered here, as many of you will not be able to get dressed. Please stay calm, you will be kept informed about Mr. Slytherin’s wellbeing.” With the last sentence she looked over at the Weasleys, huddled together on one of the saggy couches – she probably should replace some of the ones worse off – framing a nervous looking Miss Weasley and a teary-eyed Miss Granger. Now she would first go to her rooms to dress, before venturing to the infirmary. The poor boy got no rest.

ooooOoooo

It had been a sleepless night. And because he still wasn’t calm enough to sleep, he had called the three Lestrange men to his study to discuss his idea of how to give the two brothers a new chance at a life.

At the moment they were eating an early breakfast – Marvolo had selected a bowl of porridge with cream, honey, and sweet cherries – while Rabastan and Rodolphus contemplated the reasons for and against pretending to be their own sons. It was obvious that they were reluctant to commit to this plan.

“You know that this is only a tentative plan at this point, don’t you?” Marvolo asked, filling his cup with fresh tea, adding three spoons of sugar before stirring. Their careful glances were stating clearly that they were not so sure about that. “Passing you off as your own sons would work as a way to keep you in your own family. But changing your identity is something we can’t avoid, if you don’t want to go into permanent hiding as Augustus has elected to do.” He had been surprised when Augustus had asked if he could stay hidden and devote his whole time to research. But if he considered the man’s interests and goals, it wasn’t as odd a choice as it first had seemed to be. And as he was sure to have enough material to occupy several wizards with research for decades, he had agreed.

Rabastan nodded. “We are aware, my Lord. But I think I speak for both my brother and myself, when I say that we are reluctant to undergo puberty and school a second time.”

Marvolo nodded, conceding the point. The life of a teenager wasn’t the easiest one – even if his own memories were clouded quite a bit, the gist of it was clear enough – and waiting several years before becoming an adult again, adding on top of that the stigma of being the son of a Death Eater… he could understand why they were reluctant to go that way.

“Maybe we could make you into sons of mine, from a different woman?” Xerxes suddenly suggested, causing slow blinking, incredulous looks from his sons. “What? You could be close to your current age, would be part of the family… and as bastards, not eligible for the position as heir. It could work.” Marvolo's old friend shrugged and then grinned at the dumbfounded look on his son’s faces.

Before Marvolo had time to contemplate that idea and the possible implications, a silver-shimmering doe came through the wall, stopping prancing before the man sitting at the head of the table. “My Lord, your heir is in the infirmary. He fell down the stairs from his room to the common room. He’ll live. I’m awaiting you at the gates.”

Without glancing back at the others, Marvolo was out of his chair and the house, and into the small garden behind it, where he apparated to the gates of the old Castle.
His Potions Master was waiting for him, giving a shallow bow from his neck, turning to walk up the path to the school at a brisk pace.

Without prompting, Severus started on his report. “The Weasley twins heard something heavy fall down the stairs. One of them claims to have heard a cry, or yell. As far as I know, your son has several broken bones, but Madame Pomfrey should be able to tell you more once we reach the infirmary.”

Marvolo opted not to answer. He was planning furiously. It was highly unlikely that his son had had an accident. So someone must have done something to make him fall. Down the stairs. So, another murder attempt. The third in as many months. The poisoning resulting in dehydration could have been deadly with another dosage. He would need to call Malcolm to keep watch over what the medi-witch did. And there needed to be an investigation. Maybe he should try to convince Henry to ask for a re-sorting. If he became a Slytherin, Marvolo would be able to shield him much better. He would be safer in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw as well.

Two minds were whirling as the two dark men walked all the way to the infirmary in silence.

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Chapter End Notes

I know its a little evil to leave you there :D

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
And for farawisa's help in keeping the facts straight.

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When Harry regained some measure of consciousness, the first thing he noticed was the thick fog in his brain, slowing down his ability to think, making his thoughts sluggish. The next was the pain he felt in several parts of his body. When he tried to move – feebly at best – he couldn’t. Maybe some form of restraint? Harry wasn’t sure what exactly had happened, and his slow mind was of no help at all.

Next he noticed two people talking, standing close to his bed. A woman and a man, most likely. At first he couldn’t understand what they were talking about, but they sounded like they didn’t like each other. There was a frosty undertone to their conversation.

Floating between waking and sleeping, Harry listened, content not to struggle to come to full consciousness, he didn’t want to face whatever was waiting for him. From the reason he felt like a train had hit him to whatever might have caused it, there was no wish to see it right now. Resting sounded like a really good idea.

“What were your actions until now?” the male voice asked with a distant politeness.

“He has a concussion, so I didn’t dare risk a sleeping- or pain-relief potion. Skele-Gro is necessary with this extensive number of fractures, but as he takes potions regularly to supplement his intake of nutrients, and to heal long-lasting damage, I only immobilized the injured parts and waited for you, Healer Greengrass,” answered the female voice, obviously annoyed that she had to speak with the other.

The man hummed, parchment rustled. “The potions Heir Slytherin-Potter has to take have no adverse reactions to being combined with Skele-Gro. There is no need to keep delaying the healing of that many broken bones. Thank you, Madame Pomfrey, for the excellent care you show our patient.” He sounded not as distant as the woman, but reserved.

“Will you tell me why Mr. Slytherin has to take those potions? I know what they are typically used for, but I feel the need to know for sure.” She had a quiet intensity in her voice. It was really important to her to get the answer to that question.

There was a sigh. “I will need the permission of my patient and his guardian, and your vow not to tell anyone. But when my patient’s guardian doesn’t agree, I will not be able to tell you anything.” The man was almost whispering now, while Harry still was floating on a nice cloud of carelessness.

There was some rustling of clothes, the clinking of glass against glass, and then the murmured words of some spell. A few heartbeats later, Harry felt himself moving away from the waking
world, closer to dreams and sleep. Maybe he had been given some potions, but all in all he didn’t really care, whatever had happened had brought him to the hospital wing, both his healer and the Hogwarts medi-witch were here. He was safe and cared for. He could sleep and let them deal with the problems.

His last thought before sleep claimed him was that Madame Pomfrey was really good at chasing people away who would bother her patients. She would keep them all away.

ooOoo

On the other side of the room, well away from the beds and the space the healers would need to do their work, there stood a small group of people. The Headmaster looked grave, as was proper for such a situation, Professor McGonagall as Henry’s Head of House, and Professor Severus Snape, as Marvolo had insisted the man stay. At the moment, Marvolo was seconds away from starting to pace in agitation. The Headmaster was infuriating as usual. Or maybe even more so.

“I want Aurors to come here and check the cause for my son’s fall down the stairs,” the dark-haired wizard almost growled. Why the Headmaster was this stubborn about it was almost inconceivable. Why the man insisted on being so contrary made no sense to Marvolo. All he achieved by his actions was pushing away his allies. Or at least it looked that way when he considered the face Minerva McGonagall made.

“I don’t think it is necessary to involve the Ministry in this, Tom. Everyone stumbles from time to time. Just last week I almost tripped over my own robes on the way down from my rooms to the office.” Luckily the old man didn’t smile when he told this anecdote, so Marvolo managed to keep the fury and anger caused by his worry – however hard it might be to admit this even in his own head – and just clenched his fists at his sides.

“Don’t be so stubborn, Albus,” the Head of Gryffindor scoffed at the Headmaster, before she turned to face Marvolo. “I made certain no students would come near the likely place the fall down the stairs started. If it was an accident, the Aurors could prove it without a doubt. And if it wasn’t, we would know as well. If we don’t call them, there are grounds for doubt, considering all that has happened so far this year.”

A debate started between the Headmaster and his Deputy, arguing back and forth, going in circles. Dark blue eyes – Marvolo had remembered to glamour his eyes just in time on their way up to the castle – met dark ones and from one moment to the other there was a familiar presence at the front of his mind. Marvolo saw pages being flipped over in something like a fast-forward replay. Then the flipping stopped and Marvolo got a good look at what was a page in the handbook on the currently valid and most-used Hogwarts bylaws. The page detailed the rights a parent had. Asking for neutral investigation of an accident that had happened on school grounds was one of them.

Sending an image of an approving nod back into his Potions Master’s mind, Marvolo prepared to interrupt the heated but useless discussion.

Out of the corner of his eyes he noticed that Malcolm and the school’s medi-witch were still standing next to Henry’s bed. To distract himself from what was happening there, he turned to the still-ongoing discussion. He could wait for hours for a lull in that particular conversation. The Headmaster maintained the point that it had been an accident and to bring Aurors into the school again would stir up unrest, harming the students. The Deputy-Headmistress insisted that not calling
someone to prove beyond doubt would cause worry and rumours to run rampant.

“It is a moot point, what you are discussing, Headmaster, Professor. I insist that a neutral party come here and make sure my son has not been attacked for a third time. I will not budge in this. I propose that we ask Madame Bones to select a team and head the investigation.” He really wanted this investigation to start. It seemed like his point had been made, as the Headmaster nodded in the direction of the only witch in their group, sending her off to inform the requested party of what was happening at Hogwarts.

Paying neither man still standing just inside the infirmary any attention, Marvolo moved over to the bed his son was lying in. He was a horrifying sight. His arms and legs were in braces, and a sort of collar held his neck immobile. Bruises were starting to form. If the boy had any less luck, Henry could have died in this fall. A third time… having another human – mortal – being needed for his plans was hard to bear.

A chair floated over and he sat down, both the witch and the wizard turning to him.

Giving the wizard seniority – the medi-witch was older, but the Healer was of greater medical authority – Madame Pomfrey stepped back as the younger Healer started to talk. “A concussion, broken wrists as well as ulna and radius in both arms, several bruised and cracked ribs, bruises in several places on his body, sprained ankle, and a broken fibula. He will recover, but it will take time. At the moment your son is sleeping, Lord Slytherin. It will be some time before he regains consciousness.”

“Thank you, both of you. I will be staying here.”

It didn’t take long for Marvolo to be alone with his son, contemplating what he might say to get the boy to ask for a re-sorting. He was absolutely sure that this wasn’t the result of an accident.

oooOOooo

John trailed behind Madame Bones on the path up to the castle from the gates. Shacklebolt was walking at his side. They both had donned their warmer crimson robes, as it looked like it would start to snow soon so far up north. Their boss – or rather, the boss of their boss in the Ministry – had been furious when the message from Hogwarts had reached her.

It seemed this year was one for serious cases. Very different from their usual fare of thefts, drunken brawls, fighting between family members… tattling on someone who might have some forbidden dark artefacts or books in his or her possession usually was the most serious their cases got.

Dementors set on children, torture of children, and two murder attempts were a real deviation from the norm.

“What do you think, Shacklebolt? Accident or murder attempt?” A cold burst of wind tore at their robes, and John saw his partner cast a new warming charm on his robes.

“I think we shouldn’t make any premature assumptions about what happened. But we might speculate about the reason we’ve been placed on the same case. Again,” was the dry response of the dark-skinned man walking beside him.
With a nod, John conceded the point. It would predispose them to interpret what they saw in a certain way. So he turned to the other question. Why were they placed together again?

“Maybe because we're good working together? I guess we would have to ask Scrimgeour to know for sure.”

“Probably.” They walked the rest of the way in silence, both deep in thought. John thought about the problem of their prolonged partnership, for the both of them. He was fairly sure that no one knew he was a Death Eater. He had never been named, because he had been a pretty new recruit at the end of the last war. And he was equally sure that their superiors didn’t know of the likely association of Shacklebolt with the Order of the Phoenix. But their different political leanings were known, and their obvious success in the last – difficult – investigation they had conducted together could have sparked an idea. Maybe they were working so well together because they complemented each other? If someone wanted to use that, it was likely they would be placed on many cases as a team.

ooOoo

Fred and George were sitting on the bottom step of the stairway up to the boys' dorms. They were making sure that not one of the other Gryffindors would walk up to the place where Harry had faltered in his stride and fallen down the stairs.

The normally easygoing and cheery red-headed teenagers now looked rather foreboding and grim. Harry was like another younger brother to them, had given them the money they had needed to pursue their chosen profession. Without his help they wouldn’t have been able to start on the serious development of their products.

The first pranks had been funny, if a little too focused on just one person. But funny. The laxative had been poorly executed. Either it had been a careless prank, or a sloppy attempt at murder. Everything after that had been horrible.

They felt the need to make sure to remove those that had caused all this from Gryffindor. Those actions were against everything the proud House of Lions stood for.

The room was filled with students. The girls had fetched homework and textbooks from their rooms. They had even managed to get dressed. The boys were still in whatever they had been wearing to bed. It was a sight to behold. If the atmosphere had been less tense, it might have been a lovely Sunday morning.

The portrait opened, and Professor McGonagall climbed through the hole, followed by a woman with short grey hair, and a pair of Aurors. “Attention! After the Aurors have inspected the scene, you all will be able to return to your dorms. I’m happy to inform you that Mr. Slytherin will be back in classes soon. Messrs Weasley, Madame Bones wants to speak with you. As you are of age, you may speak with her alone, but if you want me to be present, I will, of course, stay.”

Fred looked over to his brother and saw that his twin had come to the same conclusion. There was no need to ask for the Professor to stay. “Thank you, Professor, but we can speak with Madame Bones without your presence.”

The two Aurors went up the stairs, while the twin pranksters spoke to the Head of Magical Law
Enforcement. They recounted the few facts they knew, talking about the party of the evening before and when it had ended.

It wasn’t long until they had finished their account and the two Aurors came back down. The one man, his dark skin contrasting nicely with his robes, turned to the twins. “Can you tell me who can get past the wards at the top of the stairs and what’s behind them?”

“Sure, Auror, those are the wards protecting the room Harry sleeps in. He's set the wards to only let friends get past them. I think the staff and prefects can get through, too.”

A few others – Ron and Hermione, Neville, Colin, and Ginny – were hovering nearby, clearly eavesdropping on the conversation. The whole room was silent, not something that happened often. But it was the reason that not only those nearest were able to hear the short report the Aurors gave to the Head of the DMLE.

“We think that we found the fraying remains of a simple tripping jinx that was set near the last step that can be reached without crossing the wards. But it was a simple one, once tripped, it is prone to vanish in a short time. No way to tell who cast it,” the shorter of the two Aurors, the one with brown hair and light skin, said with a helpless shrug.

“So we will need to interrogate all the Gryffindors?” Madame Bones rubbed her hand over her eyes. It was an enormous task.

From the sidelines of the circular common room up in Gryffindor Tower, a girl looked on, conflicted. It seemed quite possible that she could get away with almost killing that slimey snake of a traitor. Because if she didn’t tell, not even a priori incantatem would reveal that she had been the one to set up that simple tripping jinx – with its helpful warning not to use it where people could fall down a ledge or something – because she had used a lumos to get back to her bed right after setting it.

But if no one found out, then she wouldn’t get the credit for her clever plan. Cormac wouldn’t get to know, her darling would be oblivious of the lengths she’d gone through to avenge him.

Getting away with it would be fantastic, but she wanted Cormac to know what she was willing to do for him.

So she watched the Aurors and Madame Bones talking, probably planning what to do next, the students sitting around aimlessly, watching.

“Are you okay, Julie?” one of her friends asked, sitting down in a sagging crimson chair next to her. “You look like you didn’t sleep too well.”

Without a glance at the other girl, all too often vanishing in the background just like herself and the others in their year, Julie got up from her chair, shoving a few first-years out of the way, walking on the most straight line towards the Ministry employees.

“Julie!” the call of her friend was full of worry and concern, but Julie didn’t listen. She was sure of what she would do. She wanted to let Cormac know what had happened, wanted them all to know how that traitorous snake had ruined her life. With each step, her determination grew, her face
flushed in her anger, her steps got more forceful.

“I had hoped that the traitor would die! That we would be rid of him!” she screeched, her face contorted into an ugly grimace. “But, nooo! He ruins Cormac’s life, ruins mine, but he will live a happy life! With money, fame, prestige!” She started to punch the nearest Auror, wand forgotten in the pocket of the robe she preferred on Sundays. “He ruins everything! Why can’t he just vanish?!” Wracked with hysterical sobs, her hands fisted into the heavy robes of the Auror, Julie Parkes sank down to her knees, spent.

With short concerned looks between the Ministry personnel, the young girl was hoisted up between the two men, while Professor McGonagall escorted Madame Bones up to the girl’s dorm to search for further evidence.

oooOOooo

After a small meal at the bedside of his son, Marvolo listened to the report John Dawlish was giving him, while Severus was standing to the side, representing the school in all of this. The Headmaster had tried to place Minerva there, as the boy's Head of House, but she had insisted on staying at the side of the girl confessing to setting the tripping jinx with the intention of killing Henry.

Filius Flitwick and Pomona Sprout were tasked with watching over the rest of the student population, so only the Head of Slytherin was available to watch over the injured student and the Auror investigating the incident on a parent's insistence.

“We aren’t yet sure she actually did cause the fall of your son, Lord Slytherin. But it is quite possible that her confession is true. Madame Bones found letters from Cormac McLaggen that contained a lot of accusations aimed at your son.” Only with great concentration had the wizard managed to not kneel, or stand at attention in Marvolo’s presence, causing a bubble of amusement that quickly died again. While his son lay unconscious in a hospital bed there wasn’t much that could hold his interest for long, or amuse him.

Marvolo stood, and started to pace. Sitting this long on a chair was taking its toll on his back. “So she set a trap for my son in an attempt to kill him. Encouraged by her boyfriend? Maybe a desire to make Henry pay for perceived wrongs?” He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “So the boy gets away with his attack because he claims the Death of Cedric Diggory – his supposed friend – has shaken him so badly that he blames Henry for it, reacting with pranks that got out of hand. The others claim that they were influenced by McLaggen…” Thank you, John, please keep me informed.” It had been so much easier when he could send a death squad after those that had infuriated him.

With a small bow from the neck, the Auror and Death Eater retreated from the infirmary, leaving behind the Dark Lord and the Head of Slytherin House.

Silence fell over the room until Marvolo started to speak about a thought that was on his mind, since he had heard that a girl – the girlfriend of the original attacker – had caused the latest incident. “It is remarkable what love for another can make humans do.” Stopping before one of the windows, looking out over the grounds getting darker by the minute, Marvolo spoke in a contemplative tone. “You changed your alliance during a war. It caused Henry’s mother to step between a murderer and her son. And now a girl throws away her entire future to gain the approval of another teenager, who probably will forget her soon. I can’t claim to understand, really
understand, why love has these consequences… Be prepared for the eventual re-sorting of my son. As soon as he regains consciousness, I will urge him to ask for it.”

As always, the Potions Master picked up on the dismissal without problems. Intelligent followers were preferable to pure muscle. They didn’t need as much guidance. But they did need a little more supervision, as they were prone to having their own goals.

Now alone again, Marvolo walked a few more steps, before he settled into his chair again, preparing to wait some more. Maybe he should ask Xerxes to take over communication with the media – especially that vicious Miss Skeeter – as he was aware he was letting his duties slide by staying with his son. Or maybe he should say, letting his other duties slide, because staying with his injured son after another attempt at murder was one of his duties, too.

ooOoo

“You think I should ask to be re-sorted?” Harry asked from his bed, opening his eyes tiredly. He watched as Marvolo settled more comfortably into the chair by his bedside before turning blue eyes to the teen.

It was a little unsettling to see those blue eyes in the familiar face. Whenever they talked over the mirror in the evening, Marvolo let his eyes stay as they were, red as rubies, and to see them glamoured now was not something he was used to.

Marvolo nodded. “I think you should. But my opinion is not the deciding one.” The look the man sent the teen sitting up in bed was a pointed one. “What do you think you should do?” Harry huffed, and frowned down at his hands, still in splints so he wouldn’t move the complicated fractures until they were healed.

“I’m not sure. I felt safe again with the new room. The constant pranks had to stop and they did. But now…” he trailed off. Now it was all too clear that there might still be people in his House who would attack him. The past hadn’t painted the best picture of their loyalty to a House member, or their tolerance towards a Slytherin – regardless if it was one by family name or sorting – so it was a real possibility that the atmosphere would remain tense for the rest of this year and the next two.

But would re-sorting into another House change that? Or would he be placed in Gryffindor again? Probably not. He had asked to not be sorted into Slytherin the first time, and the Hat had listened, to assume that the Hat would listen again wasn’t that much of a stretch.

Harry sighed, propped up on his pillow, he felt vulnerable. He felt as if the decision had already been made. “But would it be better anywhere else?”

“I think that you would be safer. Slytherin would respect you, if maybe only for your name and connection to me. Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw are much less inclined to oppose someone simply because their family is associated with Slytherin. The Headmaster has concentrated his efforts to gain allies against Voldemort on Gryffindor House. Consequently, families sorting regularly into the House of Lions suffered greatly during the war.” The older wizard spoke in soft tones, his hands resting folded in his lap, one leg thrown over the other, a picture of calm and poise.

“So you think I should ask for a re-sort. And what would you say if I was sorted into Hufflepuff?”
Some time into the regular mirror calls, Harry had started to use 'sir' less and less often. And ignoring the rule established during their very first meeting, Marvolo hadn’t insisted on the use of the address.

Now the man shrugged, smiling slightly. “Hufflepuff lays emphasis on hard work and loyalty. Both are characteristics that someone can be proud of.” Both of them knew of the negative prejudice most people held for Hufflepuff. The House of those fitting nowhere else, of the dregs of society.

It was probably a parent thing to say kind things to nervous kids. However old they might be. “And your real thoughts on this?” Harry was sceptical that Marvolo had told the truth.

“That is my real opinion on Hufflepuff. I had a few followers who had been in Hufflepuff. I only ever had real problems recruiting Gryffindors. So there are children of my people in all the Houses but Gryffindor. They could influence the situation in your favour.”

The rest of the time Marvolo could stay he spent telling Harry of his travels just after school, while he had been working in a shop situated on Knockturn Alley. Borgin and Burkes. A place selling and buying old and questionable objects, more often than not things the Ministry would call dark. Visiting places to acquire such objects, investigating their value. It was an interesting way to pass the time until Madame Pomfrey brought a small bowl of broth for Harry’s dinner.

With the promise to be back the next morning, Marvolo reluctantly left.

Harry endured being spoon-fed, happy that his guardian was not there to watch, and then settled down, waiting for his friends to show up.

ooOoo

Hermione looked around the infirmary as she and Ron walked through the door. They wanted to talk to their friend, and had been told he was awake, so they had made their way up straight after dinner.

Once the two of them walked around the screen surrounding the bed, seeing a chair near the bed, they spotted Harry and more or less successfully suppressed gasps. Harry looked horrible. With the purple bruising on his face, the casts on his arms, and the white sheets, he looked so small in his bed.

Green eyes opened, and the injured teenager flashed them a tired smile. “Hello, Hermione, Ron! Come, sit, and tell me everything. I haven’t had many visitors.”

“Not even… Lord Slytherin?” Ron faltered before he could decide what name to use for Harry’s guardian. He blushed because it was obvious both of his friends had noticed his indecision.

Hermione went to get a second chair to sit on, and only got to listen to Harry’s response to that question. “He was here. For quite some time, too. But besides him and Madame Pomfrey, I haven’t seen anyone. And they couldn’t tell me what I want to know anyway.” Hermione levitated the chair she had found, seizing the opportunity to practice. “So. What’s the talk in the common room?”

In logical order Hermione started to recount the rumours and happenings from the common room,
generously embellished by Ron. Harry nodded along, trying to distract himself from the growing pain in his broken bones by listening to the tale. It filled in some of the holes, but Harry had to concede that, barring the rumours, he had already known the facts.

“So the speculations over a possible re-sort are overflowing again,” Hermione concluded her report. “Is the option on the table?”

Harry nodded cautiously, making a grimace at the twinge in his chest. “Yeah, my guardian said he wishes for me to ask for a re-sort. Explained that he thinks the other Houses would be safer for me.” Wiggling his nose, as it was itching and he couldn’t scratch it, Harry searched for the words that would explain to his oldest friends his stance on the whole re-sorting thing. He could see that Ron was fighting with himself, probably to not blurt out the first things that came to mind. “You’ve seen what the others think of a Slytherin in Gryffindor. Even if it is only by adoption... the atmosphere just isn’t right anymore.” Harry turned his eyes to the red-faced wizard standing next to their bushy-haired friend. “The rest of this year, two years more, with new first-years coming in... I feel like I won't have a safe place in the tower for the rest of the time we'll be in school here.” He sighed. It was clear that Ron wasn’t happy with the idea of Harry's being placed in a different House. But he couldn’t say anything to dispute the problems Harry had laid out, however much he wanted to, it simply was the truth.

“If you can’t feel safe any longer, Harry. I think it is best to let the Hat put you somewhere else. But you are aware that there will be a lot of fuss about something like this?” Hermione was once again the voice of reason.

“Yes, Hermione, I know. But I’m sure that it can only get better, because the rivalry isn’t as bad between the other two Houses and Slytherin… So... I can count on you staying my friends? Because that is the only point keeping me back. I don’t want to lose you.”

With reassuring words and nods – Ron’s not as convincing as Hermione’s – his two friends said goodbye as Madame Pomfrey decided it was time for them to leave.

Once the Matron was alone with her patient she came over to Harry’s bed, a phial filled with potion in her hand. “You will take this pain-relief potion, and then you will sleep. I should be able to let you go back to your lessons sometime tomorrow. At the latest, you should be able to leave before dinner. Bottoms up!”

She held the phial up to Harry’s mouth – as he was unable to hold it himself – so the teenager could drink down the potion. After that she helped her patient to settle somewhat comfortably under the covers, before she left to let him sleep.

Tomorrow would be an interesting day. And that was one of the few certain things remaining.

oooOOooo

Dust covered every horizontal surface and quite a few of the walls in the entryway of the old house Severus was contemplating – not for the first time – selling. But as the neighbourhood only got worse with time, the prices for land and houses were steadily declining. Not a good time to sell.

But today he wasn’t here to contemplate the meagre belongings his father had managed to gain and leave for his son. No, he was here to have a look at the things his mother had stored in the cellar
one afternoon while her husband had been out drinking with his friends.

He was reasonably sure that the trunk and boxes held the information he needed. Information on the requirements to claim the Prince seat on the Wizengamot. As far as Severus knew, there still was an old manor somewhere, and some valuables in a vault. And the Prince family had been small for the last several generations. He probably was the most eligible descendant of the family for the Lordship. At least concerning the most direct and shortest line descending from an actual member of the core family. Severus’ mother had been a Prince, even when all contact between her and the family had stopped once she had married Tobias Snape.

Severus walked down the stairs into the darkness of the shallow cellar, reeking of mildew, damp earth, and stale air. He cast a lumos and started to pick his way through the room between old cardboard boxes and furniture.

After some time – and much suppressed cussing – Severus found the trunk he was searching for under a moth-eaten, faded blanket. For a moment the young wizard pondered the best way to proceed from here. There wasn’t much room to move down here. Bent almost in two to avoid bumping his head, Severus cast a spell on one of the broken chairs standing about, causing it to glow. With his wand now no longer occupied with a lumos, he could use it to levitate the clutter standing all around to make a way from the place where the trunk sat to the door. Before he would sit here in the cellar to go through the documents, hell would freeze over.

Levitating the trunk out of the cellar was no easy task, and once the old and battered trunk touched down on the faded, threadbare carpet, Severus made himself a cup of coffee, washing the stale taste from his mouth.

After a good stretch – bending in two was not good for his back – he sat down on the floor and opened the trunk. It was filled to the brim with books, letters, unbound parchment, wizarding photographs, as well as different knick-knacks. Sighing, Severus braced himself for long hours of searching through years of repressed memories and attempts at communication.

Some hours later – in the early hours of Monday – the living room was covered with several stacks of books, letters, and parchment. But the really important bits of information Severus had taken into the kitchen, placing them on the rickety table by the window. It was still dark outside, and the flickering street lamp wasn’t able to cast a steady light on the overgrown front garden.

Taking sips from his honey-sweetened hot drink, Severus organized the information he had found. One was a letter from his grandparents, whom he had never met, writing to his mother after Severus had started at Hogwarts, telling her that they had made him the heir. Sadly, his mother had made no comments on this and obviously hadn’t accepted the offer for money. If she had done, he certainly wouldn’t have had to get everything second-hand. There were several letters from later dates, commenting on accomplishments Severus had made in school, making the Potions Master wonder why they never wrote to him directly. Had his mother placed an owl redirection ward on him? It was unlikely, as she only very seldom used magic once her husband had lost his composure, starting with the violence. Many of the letters had still been sealed, so his mother probably had simply ignored them. Severus had long since assumed that he had inherited his pride and stubbornness from his mother, now he was certain that he was right.

Among the letters was a small book, detailing what Lord Prince had to do, family values, and an accounting of old family assets and alliances. But the most interesting at the moment was a text detailing all conditions an heir needed to match before he was able to claim the title.

Now he sat there in the old kitchen of his childhood, a list of requirements on parchment on the table in front of him. It was a little disconcerting how well he matched the description he had
gathered from the pages of the book. In age, over thirty. He had worked for over a decade in a respectable position that was not estate management. He was healthy and able to father a child. All in all, it seemed like a really short list. What did he know about the customs? About the family traditions? About really anything that mattered? But the Dark Lord had been quite clear, and the prospect of having influence, direct influence, on decisions of the Wizengamot… It was something to consider.

In the past, he would have struggled with this alone. He had never had anyone close in the Order, mostly because as a spy he had been hidden for too long to be trusted. And among Death Eaters there mostly was a kill-or-be-killed mentality. That might change in the future, but at the moment he had a person to speak to who would be equally affected by any choice he made in this. Gathering the pertinent information into a small improvised satchel, Severus cleaned up the living room with a swish of his wand, simply dumping all the other things back into the trunk, before he made his way out of the house.

ooOoo

Sonja just was taking the money from an elderly witch – who was constantly complaining about the rise in the costs for dried dragon dung – when Severus came into the Apothecary, looking around as if he were searching for someone or something.

As their eyes met, he smiled and walked over to the counter, aptly sidestepping the few early-morning patrons. She nodded in the direction of the entrance to the offices at the back, signalling him that she wanted to meet him there. His nod was confirmation enough, and a quiet word to one of the helpers made sure that the counter and shop wouldn’t be empty while she was gone.

“Sheverus,” she greeted him with a smile and a small frown. “You look like you haven’t had an hour's sleep tonight.”

They exchanged a kiss, and her wizard smiled a little tiredly. “That is because I haven’t slept all night, nor much at all this weekend. I know that’s hardly ideal. I will take an energizer before I start teaching today, and I will go to bed early.” It felt silly to reassure her in this manner, but at the same time it felt wonderful to have someone worrying about his sleep – or lack thereof. “I wanted you to read this,” he handed her the small bundle from inside his warm robes, “and tell me what you think about it. I’ll be back after dinner?”

With an exasperated sigh, Sonja accepted the bundle, and then gave him another quick peck on the lips. “I’ll have a look and will see you tonight. But you need a good night’s sleep, Severus.”

Thinking back to what had been in the Prophet this morning, she was aware that it was unlikely for him to find true rest for some time, so she simply gave him another kiss and a little shove. “You shouldn’t be late, love. It feels like you'll have much to do, with all that is happening.”

He sighed and enveloped her in a strong hug before he stepped back. “Too true, Sonja. I will try to come by in the evening. Or send an owl, if I can’t manage to visit.”

“I would prefer you get a whole night of sleep, rather than you stressing out to come visit on a Monday evening.” He accepted her prioritising with a nod before they parted with another kiss.
As promised the day before, Madame Pomfrey released Harry from the hospital wing on Monday morning. In time for breakfast and all lessons of the day.

On his way down to the Great Hall – It was fantastic how magic was able to heal injuries – he walked slowly as Marvolo came up the stairs. “Henry, I’m glad to see you out of bed.”

Harry nodded. “I’m glad to be out of bed, too. Why are you here, sir?”

“I said I would be here, didn’t I?” Marvolo asked, turning with swinging robes so he was walking in the same direction as Harry.

“That you did, sir. Will you stay for breakfast?”

“Why not? It has been years since I last ate at one of the tables. And I don’t recall ever eating at the Gryffindor table.” His eyes were crinkled in amusement, and Harry was unsure if he wanted to laugh or to cry. The man once known as Lord Voldemort would eat breakfast between students at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall. It seemed like his life was doing everything to avoid getting boring.

The moment they set foot into the Hall, Harry realised that the rumours would grow to new heights because Marvolo had come here to eat.

It was a nice breakfast. The other students kept their distance while Marvolo and Harry talked about their plans for the upcoming holidays. There were a number of balls and festivities to attend. The school Xerxes Lestrange had founded this year was having a festival with songs, a play, snacks, and a small arts and crafts market. Harry was glad they would visit the school – that sounded like fun – but wished he could get around attending so many other parties.

When it was time to go to the first class, Marvolo said goodbye and vanished from the Great Hall and the school grounds without speaking with any of the staff.

Before Potions Theo walked over to Harry where he stood by his friends Granger and Weasley, clearly separated from the rest of the Gryffindors. “Harry, there are thousands of rumours running wild. What happened?” Sadly the matron had barred entrance for all students from the infirmary on Sunday, so only his two closest friends and his guardian had been allowed to visit.

“I fell,” was the deadpan answer, forcing Theo to contain a laugh. That the heir of Slytherin was a true Gryffindor was just too good to be true.

“Remind me to tell you a few of my favourite variants.” He gave his summer guest a friendly pat on the shoulder. “I’m just glad that nothing too serious happened.”

Draco and the others had badgered him to ask if the rumour that he would ask to be re-sorted was true. Vince and Gregory wanted to know if it was true that the girl had ambushed him from behind. But Theo had convinced them all that it would be idiotic to ask such things between classes in the
corridors. Would one of them answer such questions in such a setting?

And neither would the Dark Lord’s son, adopted or not, Harry had more than a few Slytherin qualities. Theo was sure of that. And he would bet his monthly stash of sweets on the re-sorting taking place sometime soon.

But not right now, as the door to the Potions laboratory opened and Professor Snape awaited them for their next double lesson of Potions.

oooOOooo

The whole day Harry felt reminded of his first few weeks at Hogwarts. And all the other times when the whole student population had been pointing and whispering behind his back. But now he was older, and had some experience with ignoring the stuff. But it still irked him.

Very much.

Harry had a hard time concentrating on the lessons, or his homework, because he constantly was thinking about whether he wanted to ask for a re-sort or not. Staying in Gryffindor – even in his own room – had become almost impossible. Too often had his housemates pranked him, tried to kill him. Gryffindor had been his home, his family, just as Professor McGonagall had told them on their first evening here. Not everything always went fine with family. His life with the Dursleys had been ample proof of that. But just because the others were family, one didn’t have to take everything they dished out.

Maybe it would be better to leave the family he had at the moment, and join another.

With a normal family, such a switch wasn’t done easily, if at all, but with family of choice it was something that could be done.

Just before dinner Harry had made up his mind.

Hermione and Ron had watched him, talked to him, all through the day. But they had avoided touching on the subject they both wanted to talk about the most. Ron probably because he couldn’t imagine Harry anywhere but in Gryffindor. And Hermione probably because she wanted to rehash all the arguments for or against a re-sorting until they were wrung out.

But apparently they both hadn’t found the courage to start the conversation.

“Can I leave my bag with you?” Harry asked his two friends as they searched for seats near the middle of the Gryffindor table.

“Why?” Ron wanted to know, sitting down inelegantly on the other side.

“Because he wants to ask for… you know. Am I right?” She directed a challenging gaze at Harry, who nodded in her direction before he turned to face the head table.

Harry sighed. “It can’t stay like this, Ron, Hermione. And regardless how I turn the problem, there’s no solution. As long as I stay a Gryffindor, there will be problems. The house rivalries are not as bad between the other Houses and the family name Slytherin.” Harry scoffed. It was so ridiculous, this separation along family names, and Houses.
Before he could change his mind – for the fourth or even fifth time this day – Harry walked up to where the Headmaster was sitting and spoke loudly, so that his voice carried quite a bit, causing the whole Hall to fall silent. “In the light of what has been happening to me here since the start of the year, I ask the Sorting Hat to re-evaluate my placement in Gryffindor. I no longer feel safe there.”

Harry saw the moment the customary twinkle in the blue eyes over half-moon glasses vanished. But before the old man could start to speak, while he was in the motion of standing from his seat, the Sorting Hat suddenly landed on top of the table, as if it had been dropped from the ceiling.

“Someone asks to be re-sorted?” the Hat’s booming voice asked into the Great Hall.

“Yes, I ask,” Harry answered, standing tall. He felt eyes take him in, weigh him. Even though the Hat only had pits hinting at something like eyes, it was obvious that the Sorting Hat was assessing him and his request.

Harry’s hands were getting wet. He was nervous. What if the Hat decided that he had no grounds to stand on and refused to re-evaluate his placement? He took a deep breath, falling with ease into one of the meditative breathing patterns he had learned from Snape.

“Very well! Not a question asked often. Place me on your head and I will see where you fit best now.”

The Headmaster sat down again, and Professor McGonagall came to the front of the table, conjuring a stool for Harry to sit on.

With a nod from her stern face, Harry turned his back on the professors, facing the students to sit on the stool. The Hall was filled with curious students all looking at the Head table and what was happening there. They all were trying to find a spot from which they could see better what was about to happen.

Just before the Hat was placed on his head, Harry spotted Hermione smiling at him and Ron looking conflicted, sitting at the front of the Gryffindor table. They had changed places to be closer.

Then a voice sounded in his head. “Well Mr. Slytherin-Potter. Nice to meet you again.” Harry could see – as the Hat no longer was so big that it fell to his nose – how everyone was watching attentively, not able to hear what the Hat was saying to Harry. “Yes, well, it doesn’t happen often that I get to see a mind for a second time. Still a difficult case, I see. But now you wonder what might have been different if you hadn’t objected against my first suggestion so adamantly? Well, we probably will never know what would have been different, but you can follow your new ambition now in...” and the last the Hat shouted out for all to hear “SLYTHERIN!”

Harry felt magic wash over his clothes, changing the colours from the red and gold of Gryffindor to the silver and green of Slytherin. He wasn’t really sure this was the best course of action. But he hadn’t been a Gryffindor for nothing. He had a goal, and jumping in was the only way to reach it. At least Marvolo would probably be happy.

Chapter End Notes

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Monday Evening, 6th of November

Handing the Sorting Hat to Professor McGonagall, Harry smoothed down his tie in its new colours of green and silver, tracing his fingers over the Slytherin House crest on his robe where the Gryffindor Lion had been just moments ago. He tried to ignore the whispers among the students and concentrated on his Transfiguration Professor as she started to speak with a sad smile.

"It was an honour having you in my House, Mr. Slytherin. I hope you will be happy with your new housemates. And I expect you to apply yourself to your studies in my lessons." The last was said in a stern tone, but with a smile in her eyes.

Harry smiled a little unsure – too much had happened in the last two days – and nodded to his old Head of House. "I don't think my guardian or Professor Snape will tolerate anything else, Professor."

After she gave him a fond smile and a pat on the shoulder, Harry walked over to the Gryffindor table, where Hermione and Ron sat, his bag between them.

"Man, you in Slytherin green, that's unsettling, mate," Ron said, a little pale.

"Don't be an idiot, Ronald," Hermione admonished, holding Harry's things out to him. "I think the green suits you. And we still share many of our lessons, and can study together. Just because Harry is in a different House now, it doesn't prevent us from spending time together."

Harry was unsure what he should say to her compliment regarding the colour green worn by him, and simply ignored it, accepting his leather bag. "Thanks for taking care of my things for me. I guess I'll have to sit with the other Slytherins this evening. Maybe you can look up what the rules say about sitting at a different House table?"

"I will," Hermione answered with a reassuring smile.

"Blimey!" Ron suddenly exclaimed, getting even paler. "You can't play seeker for Gryffindor anymore!"

The shocked faces of his oldest friend startled a laugh out of Harry. Of course Ron would think of Quidditch. "Breath, Ron! I'm sure Ginny or some of the others will take the position without
problems. And it's not like I'm going to play for Slytherin now, is it? The team is complete and plays well together."

A hand landed in a friendly – but strong – clap on Harry's shoulder. "They would be stupid to not even consider letting you play on the team, Harry," one of the twins said, while the other smiled over from behind Ron. "Go over to the Slytherins, Harry. We're all hungry, and you are delaying the proceedings."

The mock earnest look brought another laugh out of Harry. He looked around and found that the twin – Fred or George, he still had trouble telling them apart – had told the truth. All the platters and dishes were still empty, the whole school focused on the five of them standing at the end of the Gryffindor table nearest to the teachers.

Harry blushed and nodded to the twins. "Right. See you tomorrow!" And he swung his bag over one shoulder, walking over to the Slytherin table. On his way he searched the faces of the Slytherins, looking for Theo and the other fifth-years, because he wanted to sit with those he already knew. At least better than the rest of his new House.

Somewhere close to the middle Harry spotted Theo turned to face his way, waving. So he altered his course and headed over to him and the others sitting around his friend.

"Harry," Theo greeted, scooting further down the bench so there was enough space for him to sit down comfortably, "welcome to Slytherin."

Some more murmurs echoed the greeting, and Harry sat down beside his friend, next to Daphne and opposite to Draco. It felt surreal. And the way they all visibly refrained from barking out their questions, made him feel apprehensive of his reception once they would reach the common room.

"Thanks," Harry said to Theo and smiled at the others, before he redirected his gaze to the food that had appeared on the table. It wasn't as diverse as the feasts tended to be, and comparing the selection to what he was accustomed to over at the Gryffindor table suggested that the elves sent specialized selections to the tables. Probably based on what the students sitting there preferred to eat.

He selected some rolls and cold venison in slices, before he filled his goblet with milk. The others around him filled their plates as well, the girls being particularly fussy, not something that Harry had noticed the girls in Gryffindor do. But maybe he hadn't really paid as much attention to the food selection as he did now.

"Will you need to borrow an owl?" Draco asked from across the table, buttering a roll and placing it beside some apple compote on his plate.

Harry frowned. "Why would I need to borrow an owl? I can send Hedwig if I need to send a letter."

"Well, don't you need to inform your godfather and Lord Slytherin about your re-sorting?" Theo asked before Draco could do the same.

Nodding, Harry now understood why the others assumed he would have to ask to borrow an owl. "I don't need to send an owl. I'll just use the mirrors I have. And I would guess that..." Harry only hesitated a fraction of a second before he decided that it would be best to stick to the form of address he had used before, "Father will know quite fast, either way. " The newly minted Slytherin quite deliberately didn't turn to look at his new Head of House, but some of the others weren't quite so subtle. Crabbe and Goyle couldn't restrain themselves from looking at the Potions Professor, sitting at the Head table.
Harry noticed that Theo and Draco quickly changed the topic of conversation after that. Discussing anything pertaining to Dark-Lord activities in the Great Hall certainly wasn't a bright idea.

"I guess you'll have our schedule from now on?" Daphne asked with a contemplative frown.

"Probably," Harry nodded with a shrug. "Or maybe not. It probably depends on whether my electives make it possible. With me in the fourth-years' Ancient Runes class, it's a little more complicated than just attending all my classes with you lot, now."

Draco nodded and swallowed before he made a suggestion. "If you don't want to wait until the Professors have sorted it out, we can compare our schedules once we're in the dorms."

"It'll get quite crowded in the dorm now, with another to sleep there," Zabini drawled, while handing the platter of fresh fruit down to the older students.

After that the conversation circled around the lack of space in the dorms, and how much Zabini disliked sharing a space with the other boys. It seemed that Crabbe and Goyle snored quite loudly, and even the best silencing charm they could manage wasn't strong enough to smother the ruckus for a whole night.

Harry mostly listened and wondered how much of a pampered brat Zabini was, or why they weren't capable of casting a stronger silencing charm on their beds. The one night he had spent in the dungeons after the attack on the Quidditch Pitch, he had felt it was not as loud as the dorm of the fifth-year Gryffindor boys. Or maybe he just had been too tired and worn out to notice.

Considering the dramatics before dinner, the rest of the evening meal in the Great Hall progressed without much additional fuss.

ooOoo

Due to his Lord's warning, Severus wasn't surprised by the call for a re-sort. And because he had interacted with the boy more closely than ever before since the summer, he wasn't surprised by the outcome either. The teen was a Gryffindor, that was just true, but he had a lot of the qualities usually associated with Slytherin as well. That he was sorted into the House of the Founder he was descended from wasn't that much of a stretch. Many a child from difficult homes – abuse, domestic violence, and the like made cunning a necessity – found their way to the House of snakes.

"Will he be alright in your House?" Minerva asked almost whispering from his side, reaching for a plate of Yorkshire pudding. Her concern for the young man who just had been transferred from her responsibility to his was evident.

"He will be, Minerva, there is no need to worry. He is a descendant of our Founder. He will be guarded by the House. I will make sure of it," he quietly reassured her. And he would make sure of it. Not only because the Dark Lord would skin him alive if he didn't do his best to protect his son, or that he would break his word to Lily if he faltered, but because he always strived to do the best for his charges.

During the normal Monday evening meal – even if he felt the effects of a mostly sleepless weekend quite pronounced by now – Severus held one eye on the Slytherin table and the fifth-years gathered near the middle of it, at all times. Before he could meet up with Sonja after the meal, he would have to make sure the newest addition to the House was comfortably settled.

Maybe it would be a good idea to give Mr. Slytherin the heir's rooms, and not to place him in the dorms together with the others. Six boys in one room was enough as far as he was concerned, even
as he was sure none of the sons of the other Death Eaters would do anything rash or idiotic, the son of Madame Zabini was quite another matter.

He was finished with his meal before his students had eaten the last bits, waiting to accompany them down to the dungeons, to make sure everyone knew and understood the new situation. When Severus noticed the first of the older students leaving, and Mr. Slytherin starting to gather his things, he stood, nodded in Minerva's direction, ignored the Headmaster, and strode down the table.

"Follow me, please, Mr. Slytherin. I will show you to your room." The teenager quickly stood from the bench and swung his bag to carry it comfortably, obediently following the Potions Master.

Soon they were surrounded by most of the other Slytherins, the first-years running – or almost running – to get ahead of the group so they wouldn't miss a thing that was about to happen, on the way down to the common room. It was obvious that they all were eager to see what they might gain from the presence of Heir Slytherin. It promised to become an interesting year in Slytherin House, even more interesting than it already had been.

Sighing silently to himself, Severus matched his stride to the unhurried steps of the teen walking just half a step behind him.

ooOoo

Theo and his friends – some of whom he had known since they all had been toddlers – walked a little behind their Head of House and the Heir of Slytherin, Harry, who now would belong to them at last. It had been a possibility, but he hadn't dared to really contemplate this outcome. Distantly he was aware that his father would be happy that Theo had managed to gain the friendship of the boy and therefore would now be in the natural position to be his guide not only into the larger society, but also into the environment that was Slytherin at Hogwarts.

"Are we sure he's a Slytherin?" Tracy said in a low tone, so only those really close could hear. "The way he acted this evening was a little brash, wasn't it?"

Glancing back to her, Theo shook his head a little. "It might seem that way, but I would disagree." Sometimes the others just didn't look deep enough under the actions of those around them. This was one of those instances. But he wasn't in the mood to explain why Harry had acted the way he had, and why exactly it was a genuine Slytherin move.

"Well, considering that the Headmaster didn't look too happy, I would guess that this was the only way for him to get it through. In front of everyone, without warning for the staff, so no one could try to talk him out of this. You have seen that Professor Snape wasn't surprised at all?" Draco explained in such a condescending tone that the girl couldn't misread his thoughts. Smirking over her frustrated huff, Theo silently agreed with Draco's assessment of the situation. The Headmaster certainly hadn't wanted Harry to become even closer to the Slytherins, would have wanted him to stay a Gryffindor. Asking for a re-sort in public had made sure that no one could claim it hadn't happened, or attempt to deny the request.

They reached the entrance to the common room and filed in after the younger years – eagerly sitting in front of the main fireplace, waiting for the expected speech – searching out their favoured places to sit.

Harry stood – a little awkwardly – next to the Professor, who stood in his customary spot for announcements to the whole House. Once everyone had settled down the Professor let his gaze sweep over them all and then started to speak. "To avoid any misunderstandings, listen closely. Mr.
Slytherin is in a dangerous position because his heritage was uncovered. Some hold his relation to the Lord Slytherin against him and will not hesitate to do him harm over it." The man spoke with a quiet intensity only amplified by the smooth silken quality of his voice. "As members of House Slytherin, it is our duty and honour to protect him, as he will stand for each and every one of us." A few surprised murmurs went through the crowed, and Theo felt his eyebrow wing up in silent surprise. Harry, on the other hand, didn't look as if this was anything new to him. "Mr. Slytherin will occupy the room reserved for the officially acknowledged heir. It is within his purview to decide who is allowed into the room and who is not. I expect that all eventual disagreements between Mr. Slytherin and any of you will not leave these rooms." With another of his dark, dreaded looks, the Professor waved for them to disperse and turned to Harry. "I will show you your room, Mr. Slytherin. Your belongings should already have been moved."

Only the knowledge that he had to finish an essay due tomorrow stopped Theo from following his friend and the Potions Professor.

ooOoo

Harry walked a small circle through his new room. It mirrored the style of all the other dorms he had seen at Hogwarts. The bed had four posts holding up a canopy, the blanket was made of wool and silk, the pillow big and fluffy. There were a small armoire, and a desk with a padded chair. All in all it looked quite similar to the rooms he had had up in Gryffindor Tower. The décor was tinted green, and the windows were charmed ones, showing a view over the lake. The room wasn't circular, and there were no curtains dividing the place. But he had his own bath, a seating area, and what could be called a little library.

They were nice rooms, and Harry unpacked his things under the warm glow of the fire's light. He wondered if the elves maintained the fire, or if he would be able to light one himself. The past winters had made it clear that the dungeons could get quite cold, and judging by the number of fireplaces in the common room, the Slytherin dorms were no exception to that fact. He would prefer to have warm rooms at all times.

Once he was done with unpacking, Harry collected the mirror Marvolo had crafted for him and flopped down on his new bed. Better to call now and start with the shorter call. After he had informed Marvolo, he would have to call his godfather. He just hoped that the fact that he had managed to forget to inform him about his fall and stay in the infirmary wouldn't make the animagus too cross with him.

The moment Marvolo answered Harry's call on the mirror, the older wizard looked surprised. "Henry, you were re-sorted? I didn't expect you to make this important a decision quite so fast." He only paused for a beat before a wry smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "But you always had quite a few Gryffindor qualities, so I guess it is not so surprising after all."

Shortly Harry furrowed his brow in confusion. How was it that Marvolo knew he had been re-sorted? It hadn't sounded like the professor had already informed him, more like he had deduced it from something he had seen. Shaking his head to get his thoughts back on track, Harry dismissed his musing over how Marvolo knew. He could just ask if he really wanted to know.

"I have been thinking about this for quite some time now. And after what happened Sunday morning… I just couldn't stay any longer. So I asked to be re-sorted before dinner." Harry shrugged as well as he could, lying on his back on the bed. He didn't wish to discuss his reasons for this decision now.

Marvolo nodded, a small smile on his lips. "Can I assume by the green just behind you that you have been sorted into the House of our ancestor?"
With a feeling of satisfaction Harry realized that Marvolo had noticed the change in decor and had naturally concluded that he was no longer staying in the rooms at the top of Gryffindor Tower.

From the heights of the castle to the lowest foundations. Well, not the lowest. The chamber probably was a lot deeper into the rocks than the dungeons were.

"Yes. And Professor Snape has given me the rooms designated to the officially recognized heir… This should have been your room as well, shouldn't it?" Sudden curiosity prompted him to ask, but he almost instantly wished his mouth hadn't run away from him. This thinking about consequences thing that supposedly was a part of proper Slytherin behavior needed some serious work.

To Harry's relief Marvolo didn't get angry, only smiling sadly he shook his head. "As there was no Lord Slytherin when I went to school, I couldn't have been the official heir. So no, those rooms wouldn't have been mine. But I'm happy that you now will reside in them. I will do what I can to add to your security."

They didn't talk long after that. Harry had to inform his godfather, and as regular communication with him was considered one of his duties by Marvolo, the man didn't object when Harry brought it up as a reason to cut their call short.

ooOoo

Sirius heavily sat down in a wingback chair next to the fireplace in their favourite sitting room. Just now he had managed to get Remus to sleep. The poor man had managed to get a cold just days before the moon was full. And as he insisted on taking the Wolfsbane, he couldn't take any other potions to combat the illness, making his nose run, his voice hoarse, his head pound. Or so at least Remus declared. Sirius wasn't so sure it was impossible to combine other potions with wolfsbane. But Remus wasn't about to risk weakening the potion that let him keep his mind during the transformation, as it never had been done. Accepting the decision of his friend, Sirius had stopped pressuring the werewolf, and had started preparing herbal teas and chicken broth.

The day before – Sunday, if he hadn't lost all touch with reality – he had received an owl from Minerva, informing him that Harry had fallen on the stairs, and had to stay in the infirmary for healing of a few broken bones. She hadn't gone into too much detail – always a bad sign – and Sirius had decided to ignore the demand between the lines that he come and visit with Harry. He felt guilty about this decision. But as Harry had his friends and his guardian – even when it was hard to admit the man would step up and do what any decent father would – and Remus had no one beside Sirius himself, it wasn't too difficult to ignore those feelings for the moment.

He just hoped that Harry would understand once he got the opportunity to speak with him.

Just as Kreacher popped a tray with a glass and a decanter of red wine to a small table just to his right hand, the mirror he always had in one of his pockets started to vibrate.

Eager to speak with Harry, Sirius got the mirror out of the pocket and answered the call. "Harry! I'm so glad you called! Remus is sick with a cold, and just before the full moon. I couldn't leave him to be by himself. I hope you understand. I give you two pranks free of revenge as a repayment. All right?"

The teenager on the other end of the mirror looked gobsmacked for a moment before he started to laugh, rolling around on what looked like a green silken comforter.

A green comforter? Sirius was confused and only barely able to wait with his questions until his godson had managed to calm down again.
Sweeping at his eyes to get rid of the tears of his mirth, the teenager, with his black hair tousled even more than usual, chuckled a little before he began speaking again. "Ohhh, Sirius! Thank you! That was just what I needed. This weekend was just sooo messed up."

The feeling of silly pranks vanished under the topic Harry wanted to discuss with his godfather, making Sirius uneasy. Had he misread Minerva's letter? Had the fall been more serious than he had thought?

"I gather you've been told that I fell?"

Sirius nodded, slipping out of the chair to sit on the floor.

"Did anyone tell you that a girl – McLaggen's girlfriend – set up a tripping jinx? I take that as a no," Harry stated drily to the look of horror on Sirius' face. "That was the drop to make the potion overflow." Harry sighed, rubbing one hand over his face. "I asked to be re-sorted just before dinner. The Hat accepted and placed me into Slytherin." Now the green eyes behind the glasses looked unsure.

Before the teenager could express his concerns, Sirius quickly tried to come up with a few reassuring words. "Well, if you feel better surrounded by people you know have ulterior motives, more power to you, pup. And I quite like Andromeda, she was in Slytherin, you know." Internally Sirius winced. That hadn't been as reassuring as he wanted to be. But judging by the tentative smile on Harry's face it had been adequate enough.

"Show me your room! I'm curious. We never managed to really get a good look at the Slytherin dorms!" He truly was curious, and he felt this was a safer topic than the change in house.

"If you never set foot into the dorms yourself, how did you manage to include all the dorms – and not just Gryffindor – in the map?" a curious-sounding Harry asked while getting up from what Sirius recognized as his bed.

"We asked others for general maps. I managed to get into Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw with a few others I was dating…" He probably should not get too deep into that topic if he wanted to keep Harry from chasing after everyone who would have him. "And mostly we got descriptions of the layout out of books in the library – that was Remus' job – or distant relatives. Regulus was always describing things when telling our parents about things from the term…"

Sirius felt better the moment Harry started to show him around his new rooms. Being a parental figure of any kind was honestly terrifying. The idea of finding an adult to adopt looked better by the day. Not for the first time Sirius wondered why James had asked him to be godfather, or why he had accepted the honour and duty. He felt unqualified for this role, only barely managing not to be a disaster. At least now, after his biggest blunder of going after the rat without a solid plan.

Maybe he could help Harry to avoid the errors he had made as a young man.

oooOOooo

For the first time that Ron could remember, he was sitting in the common room together with all the other Gryffindors waiting for the Professor to come in to give them an official speech. Probably it wasn't really the first time, but now, with Harry missing because he had been re-sorted, he was much more focused. Normally he would pass the time while waiting by joking with his best mate. Not focusing on the tension like he was now.

The room fell silent the moment the stern Transfiguration Professor climbed through the hole
behind the portrait, her eyes cold, her lips pinched. Ron was certain that he wasn't the only one
squirming in his seat, even though he had not done anything wrong. He was pretty sure he hadn't
done something wrong. Hermione would have told him, and would still be nagging. She might
have lost some of her love for rules, but she still lamented when there was the need to break or
bend them.

"Never in all my years as Head of Gryffindor have I been so ashamed of my students. I'm aware
that not all of you knew about or participated in the pranks and attacks on Mr. Slytherin. But one of
our own no longer felt safe among us. Because of actions taken by a Gryffindor, and from inaction
by others. We all – and I include myself in this – should have done better. Miss Parkes has been
taken into custody and will not return anytime soon, if at all." She made a small pause, letting her
gaze wander over the gathered students, making Ron feel even more like he had thrown a rock
through the kitchen window. "Bullying will not be tolerated, and I will make sure all prefects
understand what constitutes bullying. It is true not everyone in a family gets along with everyone
else all the time. But picking on someone is not something a family does either. I hope you all will
learn from this, and not abandon your friendships with Mr. Slytherin only because he now has
joined the House of his ancestor."

Before they really could process what the Professor wanted to say with this, she had vanished
again, leaving the students on their own. It took a few minutes, but soon the gathering had broken
up into several smaller groups, discussing what would happen next.

Ron sat next to Hermione, not really listening to her prattling about all the different rules for visits
to the common rooms of other Houses, or when it was acceptable to sit at a different table for
meals. Ron didn't want to lose his friend, and that Harry had waited so long to ask for a re-sort
because he wanted to keep him and Hermione close felt good. But he felt like that it would be hard
work to keep their friendship.

"Hey, Ron!" The twins plopped down next to Ron and on the floor. "Tomorrow after classes we're
going to have a tryout. We need a new seeker. Angelina wants the whole team to be there."

Oh yes, there was Quidditch, and they no longer had Harry to play for them.

oooOOooo

It was late when Severus finally managed to prepare for his promised visit to Sonja. But before he
could reach the edge of the wards to apparate to her flat, a small owl winged its way down to him,
obviously aiming to land on him wherever it could.

To prevent the bird from landing on his shoulder, or – magic forbid – his head, the Potions Master
extended his arm as a perch for the messenger. With deft fingers he untangled a small scroll from
the owl's leg, noting his name written on the outside in a familiar cursive. He had seen it many
times on orders he had gotten from the apothecary. And on almost all his letters of the last weeks.
This was from Sonja.

Slightly altering his path as the owl took flight again, Severus unfurled the letter and read it by
wandlight.

Dear Severus,

You are not here yet, so I guess you will disregard your promise to get an early night in favour of
visiting late. You need your sleep, so I will send this letter by express owl. I want you to get some
real rest!
I managed to look over the information you gave me and am happy that it seems you are fulfilling all the requirements for the Prince Lordship. I like the one stating that working in a respectable position is expected. Right down to earth, that. Those are family values I can uphold.

Today there were a few gossiping witches in, looking for hair-care potions, it was easy to steer them to the topic of society weddings. My vote goes to marriage before you take the seat. There is no way either of us wants the attention a marriage after would bring us.

Go to bed, get some rest, write me back in the morning.

Love,

Sonja

Smiling softly to himself, Severus walked a short round over the grounds, savouring the cold fresh air before he returned to the castle and his quarters in the dungeons. Of all the people making claims on his life, Sonja was the only one whose orders he always would follow with a happy smile.

Snarking at that sappy thought, Severus wondered at what love was doing to him. It really could be a dangerous force.

oooOOooo

Tuesday 7th of November

The common room fell quiet the moment Harry walked through the portal leading to the boys' dorms. Theo walked over from where he and the rest of the fifth-years were waiting and sketched a bow in the other teen's direction. "Heir Slytherin."

Said teen rolled his green eyes – while Theo cursed Daphne for pointing out, repeatedly, how well Slytherin green matched them – stepped close to him and the others, shaking his head. "Seriously, Theo, don't. I never loved the attention coming with being me. So if we could be just us in the common room, at least, that would be great."

A few nervous chuckles could be heard from some of those Slytherins who had Death Eater parents, or close relatives. Theo smirked, Harry was refreshingly blunt. "I'm sure I can manage to behave somewhat normal. But you know what will likely happen if we don't follow protocol, or you get hurt?"

Settling his bag a little better on his shoulder, Harry nodded, his hair as unruly as ever. "I know who he is, and what he's willing to do, to protect… his heir. I'll try to make it easy on you all." A dark-haired head nodded in direction of the Greengrass sisters, Draco, and his two goons, green eyes sweeping the room as if he was trying to spot all those linked to the Slytherin family through more than House placement.

Sometimes Theo wondered how much Harry knew of the Dark Lord's actions and followers. And then they started to walk up to the Great Hall for breakfast. That wasn't an uncommon occurrence. Most mornings they walked in big groups up through the halls. It was a tradition that had started roughly at the same time as the other houses had started to alienate Slytherin openly. Not leaving the younger years at the mercy of some of the older Gryffindors had become paramount.

For a moment there was a hush in conversations in the Great Hall when they stepped in and found their places at the Slytherin table.
Theo sat down next to Harry, and the others from their year took seats around them. They all started to fill their plates with the various foods, when Draco stopped reaching for a bowl of scrambled eggs, staring at a small phial standing next to the goblet in front of Harry. "What's that? Henry?"

"My daily nutrient potion." With a sigh the phial was opened and Harry had downed the contents, only making the slightest of grimaces. "Daphne, can you hand me the pumpkin juice?"

"Certainly. Here you go."

From there on it was a pretty normal breakfast. There were dark clouds racing over the enchanted sky of the Great Hall, and when the owls came in, the students were sprinkled with the raindrops from hundreds of wings. The droplets of rain were ice cold. It was sure to start snowing soon.

Some letters and newspapers were delivered to their table, ignored by Harry, who carefully selected an apple from the stack near his right hand.

Pansy gasped and hurried to open the Daily Prophet, almost knocking over a pitcher of milk in the process. "Look at that! Skeeter has found a new target!' Her ear-piercing voice secured her the attention of half the Slytherin table and quite a few Ravenclaws as well. And because it was almost tradition by now to read humiliating articles out loud, Pansy started to read them all the main article of today's edition.

"Student Liaison at Hogwarts spells Disaster!" she proclaimed with obvious delight on her face.

Theo felt Harry heave a sigh at his side, taking another helping of scrambled eggs.

"After the victorious game of the Heir of Lord Slytherin on this past Saturday, the confused Gryffindor girl Julie Parkes set a prank that nearly cost our beloved Boy-Who-Lived his young life. Quick help by the competent Medi-Witch Poppy Pomfrey was able to prevent any lasting damage. Persisting in keeping his adopted son safe, the well known, young, and gorgeous Lord Slytherin insisted that Aurors be called to investigate and stayed the whole day at his son's side in the hospital wing. If that isn't the act of a devoted father, I don't know what is, my dear readers!"

Snickers rose from different spots around the Slytherin table, and Theo noticed another unhappy sigh from Harry, who shook his head the moment Theo raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Oh listen, this is the best! Witnesses described Miss Parkes' actions as seeming to be under compulsion, and her friends confirmed that she has acted depressed and erratic ever since Mr. McLaggen was expelled from Hogwarts for attempted murder. Her parents have asked a healer to perform a full medical scan for undue influence. There are rumours about Cormac McLaggen using spells and potions on young, impressionable girls to get them to spend time with him. With him alone. Ohhh I always knew he was the worst kind of guy for a girl to get close to! Oh, look, there is even a bit about a frantic Mr. McLaggen trying to defend that oaf of a son!"

Theo no longer listened to the gossips revelling in a new kill – figuratively speaking – when Harry stood, gathering his bag. "What's the first class we have?" the green-eyed teen wanted to know, slowly moving away from the table and towards the entrance hall, prompting quite a few of the others to stand as well.

Before Theo could answer the question, they were approached by the red-headed twins from the Gryffindor Quidditch team. "Hey there, Harry!" the one on the right called out. "Can we ask our favourite Slytherin for a favour?" asked his identical brother from the left. Beside the point that they were middle sons of the Weasley family and therefore probably closely associated with Dumbledore and the light faction Theo didn't know much about them.
With amusement clear as day in his voice, Harry answered the two wizards with a question of his own. "And what would that favour be?"

Both twins wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders, effectively sandwiching the smaller teenager between them on the way out of the Great Hall. "Well, we have a rather good grasp on what the typical Gryffindor student expects of prank products. We even managed to ask a few Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. But the Slytherins, Harry, the Slytherins have been giving us trouble."

"You want me to help with your market research?"

"In essence, that is what we want to ask, yes." confirmed one of the brothers – Theo wasn't able to distinguish between the two and never had bothered to even try until now – while the other one only nodded with a wide grin on his face.

"We might come up with something. But we have to be careful, Professor Snape is sure to be more alert to mischief than Professor McGonagall." The nods the twins gave to that statement were rather grave, acknowledging the fact that the Head of Slytherin House wasn't known for his leniency with pranks.

"That we will be, Harrykins! We will see you later!" And with this parting shout the two of them vanished, leaving a smiling Harry and a few confused Slytherins behind.

"Marketing research?" Draco drawled and tried to pry for information all the way to their first class of the day.

Draco had a good feeling about his chances to get closer to the Dark Lord's heir after lunch. The other teen had been friendly to them all most of the time, sitting with him, Daphne, or Theodore instead of members of the other Houses. If he could keep Crabbe and Goyle from doing something stupid, and himself from insulting the Gryffindors, he probably should be able to improve their relationship.

The moment they walked down the hill to the place they usually had Care of Magical Creatures – somehow he wished he had taken another elective in third year, another subject he was prone to get dirty doing hadn't been his best idea – the reality of Henry's association with unworthy Gryffindors came crashing down around him.

He had to remind himself that Granger was the heiress to the Lestrange family to prevent a sneer from marring his face, as the girl came over from the greenhouses.

"Harry!" she shouted, waving one arm frantically through the air, her red mittens clear to see in the dreary weather.

"Excuse me?" Henry didn't really wait for them to answer in any form or fashion before he took off – at least at a respectable pace, Draco was happy to note – walking over to the two Gryffindors he had been friends with since first year.

"You didn't really think he would leave his friends just because he now is a Slytherin?" Theodore said with a sarcastic lilt to his voice, clapping him on the shoulder, before adjusting his hat and scarf, to better keep warm.

The rest of the way to the gamekeeper's hut, Draco kept an eye on Henry and the Gryffindors. The Weasley seemed to be unsure how to act, Granger was constantly talking. So nothing new there.
Draco groaned quietly when he spotted the gigantic shape of Hagrid, the half-giant, waiting for them by the pile of wood he passed off as a kind of house. The man was grinning, as far as Draco was able to tell through that brush of a beard, and gestured for them all to come closer, earning himself wary looks not only from the Slytherins.

"Hello there, Harry! I heard about you being re-sorted! May do them snakes some good to have a Gryffindor among them. Don't yah think?"

Draco ignored what was said after that. He lamented that the oaf once more was their teacher. Grudgingly, he had to admit – only in his own head, mind you – that the man knew his monsters and could handle them. But he had the regrettable tendency to judge his monsters by what he could do. Last year and the monstrosities they had had to raise was a prime example of that.

"Come on!" the giant called, hefting half a cow onto his shoulder, dripping blood onto the leaf-covered ground near the forest.

Had he told them what they were going to do? Draco remembered with a shudder the one time he had set foot on the ground under the dense foliage of the forest normally forbidden to students. He still wasn’t sure what the teachers had been thinking, assigning first-years a detention at night in the Forbidden Forest. It had been horrible, so Draco kept close to the others as they followed their Professor in a tight group deep into the dark wood. The smell of rotting leaves and raw meat only serving to remind him of that horrible evening they had been searching for a wounded unicorn.

The following lesson on Thestrals was both eerie and fascinating. Once the question on who could see the skeletal horses was answered, Draco was, at the same time, sad that he couldn’t see them, and glad he couldn’t. And then he realized that he wasn’t able to tell which death Henry had allegedly seen had been the one making him able to see the beasts so closely related to death.

Rumour had it he had seen Quirrell die. He certainly had been in the room when the Dark Lord had killed his mother, if one could trust the stories circulating concerning the events of that night. There was no doubt that he had seen the death of Diggory last year. And judging by his face, he was seeing them not for the first time…

It was hard thinking what life had to be like for Henry. Just this summer Draco had finally realized how dangerous the Dark Lord was, and that his family name wasn’t enough to protect him from the man or from what would come for him in the years to come. It was a sobering thought that Henry probably had known this since they had been eleven.

Once, Draco had resented the other boy for the fame. Now he believed it had mainly been envy and hurt pride over being rejected. Draco was happy that Henry was either Gryffindor enough to just give people another chance, or so truly Slytherin that he gave it out of the realisation of the political potential a friendly relationship between them had.

oooOOooo

Several cracks of apparation filled the room Marvolo was overlooking from his comfortable throne set up on a dais. He had been happy to learn that Henry had enough Slytherin qualities to be sorted into their family’s House at Hogwarts.

But now that his son had changed into one of the Houses containing more children of his followers than any other, he should make sure that they all knew what he expected of them.

Once he rose from his seat his Death Eaters sank down to one knee, bowing their heads in respect. It was a sight to behold, all those people clad in dark robes with their white masks bowing to him.
in respect. Maybe he should issue a statement banishing the robes and masks from being necessary for every meeting. In the past he had sent his people out to attack some family or place with little prior warning, if any at all. Therefore it had been best to make them bring the props to intimidate and conceal their identity to every meeting. As it now would probably never again become necessary to employ such tactics, it might be best to get rid of another of the outward signs of the continued existence of the Death Eaters.

"I'm sure those of you with children of Hogwarts age have already heard about the re-sorting that took place yesterday evening. My son and heir was sorted into Slytherin." He saw some heads look up at that, so a few still must have been ignorant about that.

"There are students at the school angered by events, willing to harm my son. I demand that you warn your children to not get involved in such schemes, but report them to a teacher – preferably Professor Snape – or protect him if it should become necessary. I trust that you will be capable of imparting to them the serious consequences for failing to comply."

Then he called for reports, sitting back down. The potent headache relief potion he had taken before he had called his Death Eaters – having one of them as personal assistant constantly at his side was working out well – made him a little weary and happy to sit down. Maybe he should take a break from actively trying to absorb one of his horcruxes with remorse, and search the scarce literature for other known ways.

The reports brought nothing to new. Mostly he had his people listen to the reactions to his actions, seemingly repairing damage done during the last war. The Department of Mysteries was slowly releasing the bodies retrieved from the lake of Inferi, sparking a rather large number of burials and memorials all around their community.

The reactions were mixed. There were those always ready to give someone another chance, those buying into the story of the young man under a terrible ancient curse, some holding onto grudges with all their might, a vast majority that wasn't sure what to think, and a few so caught up in their own problems that they really didn't care.

It was useful information, and a good basis to make his next decisions on for what he should do over the winter season and it's customary social gatherings.

"Before I release you to go home, give me an update on your efforts to stabilize our population. Xerxes." He called his oldest friend to report first because he wanted to get the news of the school first. Maybe those that had trouble having more children of their own would contemplate adopting one of the children Xerxes and London had found and rescued into their own families.

"My Lord, we now have ten young witches and wizards at the school, who were stranded in the muggle world without suitable guardians. Another thirty kids of differing ages with adequate non-magical guardians are attending lessons five days out of the week. Some of those families are eager to discover potentially magical ancestry. One of them already has spent a lot of time tracing their ancestry through the ages by muggle means. They hope for help from our side. But I fear the goblins still are reluctant to conduct as many ancestry tests as we could need. I have the feeling that for once it isn't a matter of money."

Lucius informed him and the others that his wife was expecting, a few declared they were still searching for a suitable partner, and then it was Severus' turn.

"My Lord, I'm happy to inform you that I have found a woman to marry. She wishes for a wedding over winter break so as not to spark too many rumours with her visits to the castle and the evenings I take off from duties to visit her."
"I'm very pleased, Severus, very pleased indeed." It seemed that his desire to increase their numbers was able to be reached with his current measures. Now he needed to decide if he wanted to give in to the constant urging of eligible witches – and some wizards – and marry himself. Leaving a family as small as theirs only with two members was a risk. And he couldn't bury Henry under the burden of marrying so young, maybe even before he was out of school, only so he would father a child as fast as possible. But he really hadn't found himself drawn to anyone. Be it man or woman. Maybe that part was still missing? This probably was another topic to research.

Chapter End Notes

I had banished Hagrid's absence to the bag of my mind somehow. So I thought this might be a good place to allow him back to the school. Not so sure about all the Slytherin's reactions, but I guess they have to test the waters on this new situation.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
And for farawisa's help in keeping the facts straight.

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Chapter Notes

I hope your summer (for all on the northern hemisphere) is better than the one here. Yesterday it was raining constantly, setting parts of the city under water. I really hope for some nice sunny days.

Thank you all for your comments and reviews. I love to read what you think of the story, what you miss, what you think will happen... When a day was hard those help me to start writing and to keep my planned schedule! Thank you very much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wednesday started normally enough. Sleepy students in the common room discussing homework that had to be done by today. Some frantically searching for someone who could help them finish, or give them the right answers. And among them, Harry, with his tie done neatly and his robes without a wrinkle.

A few things were different, though. The common room wasn’t round, the students bore the Slytherin crest – or the version used in the school, only with the snake – and they weren’t trying to bribe their friends with sweets to get last-minute help with homework, but were exchanging favours, or collecting them. It was a strange system, but Harry guessed that it could work out without too much hassle if the favours granted and asked for all revolved around homework and other inconsequential stuff. But to stay on the safe side, Harry decided then and there never to grant a favour in such an exchange without specifying for what the favour could be exchanged.

In a way, it reminded him of the lessons he had had during the summer with Marvolo, as well as with his grandfather’s portrait. The system of favours and the political dance that was common practice among the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot. If one wanted to pass a specific law, get something through the Wizengamot, support a specific department or project, more often than not it was necessary to get someone to agree who normally wouldn’t be on your side.

At first it had felt dishonourable, but as both Marvolo and the late Lord Potter, who had been on Dumbledore’s side most of the time and opposed to families like the Notts and Malfoys, had told him the same thing, there was no other option than to believe that this really was the way things were done.

He had to be careful. With his position as heir to two families and ties to at least one more, any favours he owned might be of higher value than he dared to think about.

“We have Defence first, right after breakfast,” Theo suddenly stated right from behind Harry, making him spin, startled. Holding up his hands in apology, the still taller boy asked a question, ignoring Harry’s hand near his wand. “What have you done last in Professor Slinkhard’s class?”

“We did a bunch of detection spells. Checking for humans, dangerous plants, animals... stuff like that. The essay topic was on how to recognize and avoid dangerous places and situations,” Harry huffed. While he couldn’t argue that this specific lesson had some value – knowing that there might be something dangerous in a place was important to being prepared – the clear emphasis on avoidance rankled with him. In his experience, problems didn’t simply vanish if you avoided them long enough.
“Then you're pretty much where we left off. Come, let’s get up to the Hall. I’m hungry.”

Nodding, Harry turned away from the windows looking out into the lake and narrowly avoided a collision with a few first-years running back to their dorms to collect something. Or so it sounded, judging from their shouts to their classmates still standing near the exit. Harry heard one of the prefects scold the kids for running in the common room just as he and the others stepped through the door into the corridor.

ooOoo

In the Great Hall, Harry waved to Hermione, who had to elbow Ron to get the red-head to pay attention as he was eating and rather focused, and walked over to his new table with a slight smile on his lips. They had no classes together today, but they had agreed to meet in the library for a study session after classes let out for the day.

Maybe it would be possible to keep his friends, find a few new ones, and bring the Houses closer together.

Harry just had selected a bowl of porridge with diced apple and a dusting of cinnamon to go with his goblet of milk – and the dreaded nutrient potion – when Montague came over to sit down across the table from Harry. Draco, as a member of the Quidditch team, looked up to the captain with a question in his grey eyes.

“I’m here to ask you something, Slytherin,” the burly seventh-year addressed Harry, waving at Draco to stay quiet. The blond looked unhappy about something, confusing Harry for a moment until the older student, playing chaser on the team, started to speak again.

“Now that you're in our House, do you want a spot on the team? You're the best seeker the school has at the moment. I want you for the team. I want to win again! And as the game between Slytherin and Gryffindor is already finished, you wouldn’t have to play against your old team… this year. What do you say?” The solidly built young man sounded eager over the prospect of having Harry play on his team, as he failed abysmally to conceal that very fact.

Harry, meanwhile, furrowed his brow. “Seeker is Draco’s position. He has trained with the team, and you're working well together. Don’t you think it would disrupt the team's dynamics to introduce me this late?” He wouldn’t even contemplate just taking the position on the team, costing someone else that position in the process. But he knew that wouldn’t be a reason the other Slytherin would accept. So he cited the other reasons this was a bad idea, expecting that it should work. Changing a well-trained team without the need to do so was bad tactics.

The captain hummed, nodding almost imperceptibly. Harry started on his breakfast. He was hungry and not inclined to give in too easily. Because, although he really would like to continue playing Quidditch at the school, he never would stoop so low as to just get Draco kicked from his position. He might or might not have bought his place on the team, but the blond was really good.

“I see your point, Slytherin,” Montague said, filling the plate before him with eggs and some sausages. “But would you try out for a reserve position? Train with the team? There's always the possibility that we need someone to fill in. Maybe someday Malfoy here doesn’t want to play anymore, or he wants to play on another position. Maybe he can train against you. I think that would be a training the other teams haven’t tried yet. Interested?”
Harry tried to remain calm and appear unaffected. This was so different from what he was used to. Gryffindor was straightforward. Do you want to play? Come to the tryout. The best will be on the team. And that’s it. This? This felt like politics. Or chess. Judging the moves the other made, sacrificing pieces to gain an advantage.

It seemed that Marvolo’s efforts to drum politics and how to play them into Harry’s head over the summer had been successful. Or at least somewhat of a success.

Quidditch was a part in this. But Montague had more than one goal here. Slytherin was a bigger player than Malfoy. Lord Slytherin a much more scary man than Lord Malfoy. Currying favour with the son of one of them was more promising than doing so with the other. That Harry was the son of the bigger fish – so to speak – and the better seeker was only one more reason to offer the position on the team to him.

Eating the last of his breakfast – licking the spoon clean – Harry sighed. “I will come to the practices and help Draco train, if… father agrees. He has said more than once that this is the OWL year, and that I have to do my very best to get good grades. He agreed to let me play Quidditch because I already was on the team. I don’t know if he'll agree now that this would be a new team.” It was a little bit of a stretch to claim this was true. But it was close enough and would give him some leeway to get what he wanted. Play Quidditch, but keep Draco as a possible friend by not getting him kicked off the team.

It felt alien, this manoeuvring. And Harry wasn’t really sure he liked making decisions like this, acting like this, playing others to get what he wanted. There just had to be a better way.

He didn’t get to contemplate this any longer this morning, here the first time he really was aware of playing the game of politics over something as silly as a seeker position on the school Quidditch team, because the Prophet and the rest of the morning’s post was delivered for this morning.

A gasp from Daphne turned the attention quickly to the headline on the front page.

oooOOooo

**Attack on small magical settlement!**

Was the glaring headline on the front page of the Daily Prophet Marvolo was scowling at, a hot cup of sweet tea held in one hand. Yesterday had been the full moon, and that obviously was the result of Greyback’s attempt to get back at him for ignoring him and his thoughts on how the Ministry’s policies on werewolves had to be changed.

He needed to react to this. For one thing, this could easily be a stumbling block to his attempts to get the harsh and unreasonable legislation abolished. Furthermore, all known werewolves would get to feel the displeasure of the public. He would have to shield Mr. Lupin, as the remnants of Umbridge’s bloc certainly would try to get at him through the man he had hired to teach his son.

But one step after the other. He needed to eat, dress, give orders to his people, and then get to the Ministry and the Minister, offering his expertise on the man.

What was named a *settlement* in the headline only had been a small farmstead housing two magical
families near a muggle village. Several people had been killed by the one werewolf attacking – even if Skeeter hinted at a possibility that there might have been more involved, describing everything in gruesome detail – and one had been injured and infected. The survivors were badly shaken, and one picture was showing an angry man chasing the photographer with a pitchfork.

The name of the two families was unfamiliar, so Marvolo made a mental note to ask Lucius to gather information on them. They probably were descendants of re-emerging magicals, maybe in the first or second generation.

Either way, they would need help. All their poultry had been killed, their greenhouses and fields partially destroyed. It looked as if they made their income on selling eggs and poultry, as well as growing native magical plants to sell to the different apothecaries.

Draining his cup and grabbing an apple, Marvolo started to pace. Maybe the newly infected man could be approached to teach the children at Xerxes’ school about herbology. It was a subject that could be taught to those too young to have a wand, and to Squibs as well. Having a werewolf on staff would also help defuse unfounded rumours and preconceptions. Marvolo would love to have a vampire teach history, but as those generally preferred to sleep during the day, it was simply not feasible to have one teach young children.

After he had made short work of the apple, Marvolo discarded the paper and made his way over to the study. He would write several letters with orders because there was no time to summon his people and give them their orders in person.

Xerxes needed to see if the position for Herbology was still open or could be split. The Carrows were to track down the werewolf, maybe they would be forced to do something about him themselves. The man had been terrorising the British magical community for so long. That the Aurors hadn’t managed to get the man was almost laughable. Maybe they hadn’t been trying all too hard? And Lucius would have to look into the families, and what might be done to help them remain independent.

The letters were written on the parchment he used for all his letters, something of high quality, but without any distinguishing marks like some Lords favoured. With a quick spell the notes would only be readable to someone with the Dark Mark, and would catch fire the moment someone without it touched them.

Barty accepted the order to make sure the letters would reach their respective recipients with a deep bow, leaving Marvolo alone in his rooms to change into his best robes.

Only minutes later Marvolo stepped into the Floo with billowing silk robes, wrapped in his best woollen cloak. In a way it was silly, but there was always the possibility his way would lead him somewhere outside today before he could come back home to get it, so he took the cloak with him even while only travelling through the fire from one building to the next.

This promised to become a difficult day.

Landing rather awkwardly in the entrance hall of the old London townhouse, Remus picked himself up from the floor, stuffing the portkey into his pocket. It was convenient that Lord
Slytherin had provided a portkey for him to get to the warded stretch of wood for his transformation and back again to this house. He always felt drained even with woldbane to help ease the transformation, and apparating back would have been difficult. With the cold that still held him in its grasp, it would have been nearly impossible to get here without splinching himself, or waiting longer before making the trip.

Before he managed to hang up his coat on the rack by the door, Sirius was there, all concern and guilt. “Moony, you're back, and look better than I would have thought.”

Rolling his eyes at his friend, who was herding him into the kitchen, where warm soup and tea were waiting, Remus chuckled and then started coughing. “I’m fine, Sirius, really. I transformed and rolled up in a sheltered, cozy spot to sleep the night away. A wolf with a cold rests if it can. So I did exactly that. Stop fussing.” Sinking into one of the chairs, Remus batted away Sirius’ hands and got himself a cup of tea.

With a dismayed expression Sirius threw himself into a chair on the other side of the table, while Kreacher bustled about in the background. It looked like he was cleaning the silver while simultaneously preparing a big meal for more people than two. The old elf tended to go overboard with food ever since Lord Slytherin had been by, promising the elf to get rid of the dark artefact the elf had guarded for so long.

“Moony, tell me, what shall I do?” Sirius dragged a hand through his dark, chin-length hair, his head falling back so he was staring at the ceiling. “I’m a horrible godfather. Didn’t even visit Harry when he was in the hospital wing. I feel like I manage to make every possible error and more. Going after Peter, when I should have stayed with Harry. Staying here with you, when my godson would have needed me.” He sighed, aggravated, his eyes crunched shut, his mouth in a frown. “I’m hopeless.”

Remus regarded his friend over the rim of his cup. He had done so much growing up in the time since he had come out of Azkaban. The old Sirius wouldn’t have known that he had made an error, or he at least wouldn’t have admitted to his mistakes. But at the same time he seemed to have lost his ability to decompress, to let go of some of the tension, the stress. Sirius needed some time to let his hair down, so to speak.

“We're all just human, Sirius. And Harry knows that you want the best for him. So please don’t chastise yourself so much, okay? I think a big part of your problem is stress. You need to relax.” Thinking back over what Sirius had enjoyed the most after they all had graduated, during his auror training, he started to smirk. That would likely work wonders on his overly tense friend.

“I think you should get out for an evening. Go to a club. Enjoy the music, a nice drink, some company…” He trailed off suggestively, startling a huffing laugh out of Sirius.

“That’s a lovely idea, Remus. But really, how can I go out like I used to? I’ll be recognized. And as I’m Lord Black now, that would spell so much trouble. No, I think I can’t risk it.” A wistful sigh escaped his friend, and his grey eyes stared dreamily into the fire merrily crackling in the big fireplace.

Remus snorted, triggering another coughing fit. It took a moment before he could speak again, but then he scoffed at the last of his schoolboy friends. “Really, Sirius, are you a wizard or not? Use a little transfiguration, glamours. It isn’t that hard to make sure no one would remember the real you if you went into a Muggle club.”

A gleam appeared in Sirius’ eyes. “You’re right. It has been so long! Once James and Lily had to go into hiding with little Harry… yeah, it was just too tense an atmosphere back then. But now I
could go out again, couldn’t I? Roam the clubs. It’ll be glorious… you’ll come too, won’t you?”

“Help you find someone for a night and stay behind? No, thank you. I think I’ve done that enough. You don’t really need any help charming the gents and ladies, Sirius. And I think it would help you to relax, you’re too wound up at the moment.”

The tension was slowly seeping out of Sirius, now he was slouching in his chair even worse than when he had first sat down. The sight made Remus smile. Sirius always had been a charmer, chasing after everyone that didn’t state clearly that he or she wasn’t interested. It had started at Hogwarts and had never really stopped. And all the time, the most outgoing of them had clearly stated his intentions. Each of his partners had known that there would be nothing serious about the relationship. No commitments, no declarations of love. Only mutual pleasure and a good time.

And strangely enough, because Sirius could be such a gentleman if he wished to be, there almost never had been drama or hard feelings. Mostly only during their time at school. After that, Sirius had mostly avoided magical clubs or parties, concentrating solely on muggle places to find his partners.

Suddenly a thought came to Remus, startling him to laugh, resulting in another coughing fit. He was so glad that he would be able to take a pepper-up the next morning and be rid of this cold. Considering how many women had spend a night with Sirius, some of them when the then young man had been truly drunk, it wouldn’t be too odd if there was some child out there… Remus got big eyes, staring at his friend who looked quite worried himself by now.

“What is it, Remus? Do I need to get a Healer? Is my hair pink?”

Shaking his head, Remus tried to calm his friend down. “No, all is well, just sit down again.” Once Sirius was again seated in his usual chair, Remus started to fill his plate with the breakfast items Kreacher had prepared for them. “Just this moment I thought, with the number of women you’ve had a close physical relationship with, there is a not-so-small possibility that the problem of an heir might already have been solved. Don’t you think?”

Watching his friend closely, maintaining an innocent air – barely – Remus saw the exact moment Sirius realized what his friend had just said. The animagus almost choked on the tea he had been sipping at, spluttering he set the cup down and looked over to Remus, mortified. “You can’t be serious, Remus! I was careful! And I stopped once the war was getting too dangerous, and Harry had been born.”

Seeing his friend getting defensive, Remus made a placating gesture with his hands. “No need to get flustered. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying life like you did. But you have to admit the odds for an unplanned child rise with every encounter.” Seeing that his friend was still uncomfortable, probably because his parents had berated him over his flirtatious nature right from the start, Remus tried for a friendly smile. “I think you should start visiting the clubs again, Sirius. You aren’t exactly cut out for the sedate lifestyle of a traditional Lord. It’s just another old-fashioned expectation that you’ll change. You know I just wanted to tease you, right?” Now Remus was really concerned he might have gone too far. The fact that Sirius really wasn’t into long-term relationships and had no preference of women over men – as so many traditional old families expected of their sons – had brought him a lot of troubles over the years. From the contempt of his father and mother, to the jealousy of those shunned where Sirius had been favoured.

If Sirius tried for the life tradition and society all but demanded of the members of the Wizengamot – looking the other way as long as some pretence was kept – he would never be happy. Better to show him that he had Remus’ support than let him try to conform to the norm.
Taking up his cup of tea again, Sirius grabbed the Prophet and flicked the newspaper open.

Remus watched as all colour drained from his friend's face, making the contrast between his dark hair and the fair skin even sharper.

“Sirius?” Before Remus managed to formulate a decent question, Sirius had downed his tea, stood, and flicked his wrist, levitating the newspaper over to his friend.

“I'll have to go to the Ministry. The blockheads will try to use this against our reforms. I'll need to do my part to contain the damage.” The grim-looking man was half out of the kitchen – probably to change out of his comfortable jeans and t-shirt into appropriate robes – when he whirled around, looking back at Remus still sitting at the breakfast table. “Rest, I'll send word if anything noteworthy happens. If you need anything, send Kreacher to me. He's faster than any owl, and you shouldn’t cast a Patronus today. See you later.”

With a horrible feeling of apprehension, Remus took up the Prophet and started to read. It didn’t take long for him to loathe Rita Skeeter even more than he already had. That woman had no qualms over using the misfortune of others for her own gain.

Reluctant but aware that he needed the rest, Remus headed for his bed after finishing a nice breakfast without much appetite.

oooOOooo

The day had started out bad. Really bad. Cornelius wished that this all was just a dream, but he knew he just wasn’t that lucky. When he had accepted the position of Minister – urged on by Lucius – he had hoped to once be known as the man who had led the way into an era of peace.

And now here he was. A man back from the dead, handed a new life, Ministry employees sending Dementors after children, werewolves attacking wizarding settlements.

It was a catastrophe that he and the rest of the Ministry – including the Aurors – had learned of the attack from the Daily Prophet. And of course Miss Skeeter had used the fact that she knew the Ministry didn’t know yet in a small article on a later page, dedicated to Ministry failures of the last years. Sometimes her shark-like disposition was useful, but the witch knew no loyalty. Someone she praised one day would be torn to the ground the next without reservation.

As long as the Aurors were gathering evidence, he would go down to the holding cells, as he had a message to deliver. With a last look to the mountain of paperwork on his desk, the Minister turned to leave his office, when the door opened.

His current assistant – Weasley, one of Arthur’s boys, efficient and a little too eager – was standing in the door, smoke rising behind him and a big red envelope screaming silently behind some spells. “Minister, Lord Slytherin is here and wants to speak with you. Do you want to speak with him?” the frazzled red-head in a neat robe asked.

“If Lord Slytherin is willing to walk with me down to the holding cells, I see no reason why he shouldn’t be able to speak with me.”

Of course the man had listened in and greeted him with a grave expression just behind the office door. “Good morning, Cornelius. I trust you have already seen the morning paper?” Blue eyes quickly glanced over to another three howlers arriving at the desk of the Minister’s secretary. This
was going to be a day like harvesting nettles.

“I have, yes.” They fell into step with each other, Marvolo erecting a barrier around them with a small flick of that infamous pale wand. “And I would bet that whoever attacked there set it up so Miss Skeeter knew that there would be a story waiting in the morning.” Cornelius really hoped that the reporter had gotten a message in the morning and hadn't known since the evening before. If she had, that would be so much worse.

“This looks like the work of Greyback. He’s unhappy with the way things are developing.”

“And how would you know this, Marvolo?” Cornelius had listened to all the stories going around. Lord Slytherin was the top topic of Ministry gossip at the moment. Greyback had been a thorn in the Ministry’s side for decades now. The way the man tried to infect as many people as possible, preferably young, was a problem. In the last war, the werewolf allegedly had worked together with some of the Death Eaters. If Marvolo still remembered some of the things from that time, it might help them find the bastard faster.

“He contacted me. Threatened me. He was unhappy with the work I’m doing to reform the current laws regarding werewolves.” Ministry personnel stepped out of their way as they turned into the corridor leading to the elevators. Two witches floating stacks of folders behind them seemed to be in a heated discussion, but not a word was audible. As Cornelius had suspected, the shield around them was a sound barrier. They stepped into the first elevator to arrive, and a few others waiting for one elected to wait for the next to come by.

Once out of the sight of prying eyes, Marvolo rubbed his eyes with one hand. “I didn’t go to the Aurors because there wasn’t anything substantial. Only vague words and past memories I somehow wished I had lost together with my last life. I think this is his attempt to sabotage our attempts. To sway public opinion. I want to offer my help in containing the possible backlash, and what I can do to locate the man.”

Nodding slowly, Cornelius contemplated the implications. The public was in general inclined to regard werewolves with leeriness. Only slowly had they accepted that not all infected with lycanthropy were evil incarnate. After such an attack – and the way Skeeter had written about it – they would only too readily go back to hating them all.

“Thank you, Marvolo. I think the Aurors could use all hints that might help find him.” With a deep sigh and a wry smile, the smaller wizard turned so he faced the so-young-looking Lord Slytherin. Young until one looked at his eyes. His eyes very clearly showed the many years the man already had existed on earth.

“And now to the easiest point on my agenda today.” They stepped from the elevator and Marvolo dispelled the sound barrier.

On the last part of the way to the holding cells behind the Auror Department, Marvolo walked a half step behind Cornelius. They crossed the paths of a few Aurors, walked past a few cubicles, and then finally stepped through the door leading to the specially warded cells. In a way, it was only right that the man who had brought the crimes to the law enforcement's attention would be there when he informed the culprit about the impending trial.

They stopped before the only currently occupied cell, looking down on the miserable, small form in the terribly dull grey robes of the Azkaban prisoners. Currently the occupant of the cell was lying down on her side, back turned towards the entrance, possibly sleeping. Knowing the conditions at the prison out in the middle of the sea from his yearly inspections, Cornelius guessed that this was the first time since she had been convicted for her crime of torturing students at
Hogwarts that she could sleep in any comfort. It was just too cold and damp for any form of comfort at Azkaban.

With a little fumbling Cornelius got his wand out of his pocket, and then cast a small charm, causing the sound of a small blast. The figure on the cot startled awake, almost falling down, ending up standing next to the cot, looking around wildly.

Her small, haunted eyes fell on Cornelius' form and his flattering pin-striped robes. "Minister! I knew you would come to your senses. I have done nothing wrong! Those children needed a hard hand to keep them in line."

Before she could continue to gain more momentum and regain her simpering tone, Cornelius interrupted her harshly. "Dolores Jane Umbridge, I'm here to inform you that tomorrow there will be a trial concerning the illegal issuing of a Kiss order. The Aurors have found irrefutable proof that you were the one to forge the documents. I have no doubt that you will be convicted. And the usual punishment for an illegal Kiss order is the Kiss." He tried to steel himself for this. Dolores had been his colleague for quite some time. She had been mostly competent, eager to rise in the ranks, if a bit aggravating over time.

The woman started to yell, sob, and beg, and Cornelius couldn't stand it, so he turned to go, but halted just around the corner. And this had been the least difficult task of the day. Now he would have to field a horde of reporters, and a mob of angry Ladies and Lords. So he stood there, taking deep, even breaths. He had hoped to have an easy time as Minister, to make a name for himself.

Trying to calm himself, he got to overhear an interesting conversation.

"That can't be true! No, I don't believe it!" That was the high-pitched denial of Dolores.

"Well, Madame. As far as I know it is true," came the drawl of Marvolo’s well educated voice. "In fact, it is part of the original agreement between the Dementors and the Ministry. Because the Kiss order is, in fact, a promised soul for feeding. So if there is one that can't be carried through, it is written down that within the year another soul has to be offered. I distinctly remember that there have been two instances where, instead of a soul for feeding, there have been substantial numbers of prisoners added to the prison." The man sounded a little amused, and there was no sound from Dolores. "That is one of the reasons, I believe, that a Kiss order isn't issued lightly most of the time."

Something heavy landed on the floor, and steps moved in Cornelius' direction. Aware that Marvolo would be there any moment, Cornelius pushed away from the wall and straightened his robes. When the young wizard in his green silken robes came around the corner, Cornelius was sure he once again was presentable, projecting not tiered bureaucrat, but Minister of Magic.

"You have read the whole treaty?" It was a massive document, and the original language was a type of post-classical Latin with sprinkles of different French dialects. Not something one would read for fun.

"It is likely that you would be surprised by a lot of things I have read over time," Marvolo said with a smile in his voice. "I once spent several weeks researching Mediterranean housekeeping spells. It was quite fascinating."

Together they walked to the Wizengamot chambers, talking about the different spells to clean a pot of scorched soup.
After the last class, Harry made his way to the library, nodding to the other Slytherins as they parted ways. It still felt pretty awkward spending the whole day with the Slytherins. But that was perfectly normal. It had only been the second day, after all.

Hermione and Ron were already sitting at their favourite table for studying. Close to the sections they needed most in their essays, far enough away from Madam Pince’s place near the entrance to be out of her field of vision or her hearing. It had proven to be almost ideal. The only problem was that many others thought the same, so one had to be quick or take one of the other tables.

“Hello,” Harry whispered, a small, somewhat sad smile on his face. Ron grinned up to him, nudging the chair on the other side of the table with his foot so Harry could grab it a little easier. Hermione barely acknowledged that Harry had said anything at all, causing him to chuckle. It was so typically Hermione.

Harry sat down in the chair opposite Ron, set his bag down next to the chair, and got out his notes for the next essay for Herbology on self-fertilizing plants. It seemed that Hermione was also working on that essay, as the book in front of her was opened to a page with the illustration of a bush with veins, throttling a small animal.

For a few moments they worked in silence, only the scratching of quills on parchment and the distant murmur of others making any noise.

Harry looked up to ask Hermione if he could use the book she had been referencing, when he met her brown eyes head-on with his own green ones.

“Are you alright? You seem distant and distracted. Any trouble?” There was honest concern in her eyes and Harry smiled again.

“If he has trouble, then it’s probably with those Slytherins,” grouched Ron, furiously scratching out a word on his own parchment.

“Don’t be daft, Ron!” Hermione scolded, surprisingly stern for a whisper. “Don’t you remember the morning Prophet? Can’t you imagine what that attack can do to Professor Lupin?”

A startled Ron looked up from his work, paling as he looked over to his friend.

“You really aren’t thinking, are you?” Hermione shook her head, bushy locks bouncing around. She concentrated on Harry again, prompting him to speak with a look.

Harry huffed, cleaned his quill, screwing the inkwell shut, before he began fiddling with his rolled-up essay. “You’re right, Hermione. There is something on my mind. But it’s not the attack – it’s horrifying, yes. Montague offered me the Seeker position on the team.” Harry heard a gasp from Ron, but the redhead didn’t say anything, probably because Hermione had silenced him, and Harry continued, “There’s no way I could steal the position from Draco just because of my name, my family… Draco is good. But… I didn’t just say it like that. There's all this manoeuvring… it feels so easy, going with the flow. It’s somewhat unsettling how easy it is.” The way he had stretched the truth this morning, the fact he called Marvolo father around the Slytherins, when he didn’t call the man that in his own head. It was positively Slytherin, and so different from the way he had acted last year. Or ever since he had started at Hogwarts. That was what had been bothering him the whole day, and now he was feeling bad for not thinking about the attack and the possible
consequences.

Hermione stretched her arm across the table and patted Harry’s hand. “It’s nice of you that you have declined the position. And you shouldn’t feel guilty that you are a natural at politics. I’ve tried to learn it. Uncle Xerxes told me that I’m too blunt most of the time. Said I have to work on being diplomatic and cautious…” She gave a wry smile, causing both heirs to chuckle and Ron to look confused.

Almost all the rest of the time they had planned to study together, both Hermione and Harry spent explaining the basics of politics in magical Britain to their friend. After going over the ways of the Wizengamot in general terms, Harry felt better. That Hermione saw things similar to the portrait of his grandfather was a great help. It was easier to accept the word of his friend than to accept the word of paint on canvas.

Her last words before they parted to go to their respective house tables made him feel really better. “It’s the intent, Harry. Wingardium Leviosa is a light spell. A first-year spell. And you can kill with it, or rescue a girl from a troll. Cunning juggling of words can do good or bad. It all depends on what you want to achieve.”

It was easier not to do things like that at all. Doing things for the right reasons was so much harder, if you weren’t sure what the right reasons were.

oooOOooo

Marvolo stepped into the house, a slight headache building behind his eyes. Flimm was there in an instant, taking the cloak as he discarded it carelessly.

What a day. Dealing with the press wasn’t something he enjoyed. Rita Skeeter was relentless in her pursuit of a story. In the past she might have made a good Death Eater. But no. She lacked the necessary potential for loyalty. No way to ever be sure she would stick to one person, case, or goal… besides making the front page.

With a weary sigh, Marvolo walked into his study, planning to check if reports were waiting for him. And to make a call via mirror to his son. The boy certainly would want to know what was happening behind the scenes. The Prophet was read all over Britain, including Hogwarts. And keeping Henry in the dark had cost Dumbledore control and the boy’s trust. He wouldn’t make the same mistake as the old goat.

There was a stack of letters on his desk. Sitting down in his chair, Marvolo checked the charmed drawer to his right hand. Correspondence from his followers had gone in there for a few weeks now. Since Henry was back in school, the strict division between home and work had started to blur. Maybe he should enforce the division better. Henry wouldn’t want to know more than he already did about the continued existence of his Death Eaters. But without a clear division it might be impossible to prevent Henry from learning more by accident.

A little later – he just had finished Xerxes’ letter confirming he could use an advanced teacher for herbology – Flimm popped into the room. “Sorry, Master Slytherin, sir.”

Rubbing a hand over his forehead, Marvolo diverted his attention from the letter Lucius had sent to the patiently waiting elf. “Yes, Flimm?”
“Master should go eat. Flimm has made food, waiting in dining room.” The elf sounded unsure. Until now not one of the elves had made food without being ordered to. How late was it? Marvolo looked over to the clock sitting on top of the mantle. It was indeed later than he had thought it was.

“Thank you, Flimm.” It seemed appropriate to at least treat the elves as well as he did his human servants. After he had met Kreacher, he had realized that an elf dedicated and happy was a force to be reckoned with. The little being had thwarted his plans, after all.

Deep in thought, Marvolo walked into the dining room, and sat down at his usual place. Then he saw the plate and what was on it. It looked like a mess. A mess made of double cream, various berries, and what looked like crumbled meringue.

His hand froze halfway to the spoon.

“Why have you made this dish, Flimm?” How on earth could the elf have known? Was this some plot to poison him?

The elf appeared with a little plop next to Marvolo’s chair, wringing its hands anxiously, ears drooping low. “Flimm saw Master unhappy, stressed. Wanted to make something to cheer Master up. Is not the right dish to do so?”

Well, it was the right dish. He loved sweets, and this particular dish had been one of his favourites, even if he never had managed to eat it another time after that first one. And as he had been contemplating going over and punishing Igor some more, he probably was in need of cheering up.

“How did you select the dish?” There was no one left alive who could know he had loved what he only knew as Eton Mess.

The elf seemed to relax and stood a little bit taller. “When Master Harry and Master Slytherin came here to live, Flimm went and asked Nott elves about what Masters like to eat. Oldest elf remembered Master Slytherin as boy. Told many things. Flimm remembered.”

An old elf from Nott? Could it be that this elf had already been there when he had visited one winter break? For his birthday, Benjamin’s father had insisted on having a celebration. The food had been wonderful, even when the rest had been somewhat annoying. Now, looking back, Marvolo guessed that the creation of his first horcrux was at least partially to blame for the lack of joy he had experienced the first time someone had cared enough to celebrate his birthday.

It caused him to feel something… he wasn’t quite sure what… that the old elf remembered that day, and mentioned it to an elf, which then proceeded to make his favourite dessert to cheer him up.

“Where did you get…” Marvolo prodded the dish with the spoon, and spotted fresh strawberries, raspberries, as well as blackberries, “...fresh berries this time of year?”

“Malfoy elves have greenhouse. Greenhouse full of fresh fruit all year round!” Now the elf was excited, not quite bouncing on its feet, but positively giddy. Maybe Marvolo should arrange for the greenhouses on the lands around Potter Manor to be renovated so Henry and he could enjoy such luxuries throughout the year.

“Thank you, Flimm. Please be sure to only keep such close contact with elves from families who are close to me.” The elf nodded, and popped away again.

Not about to let the nice food go to waste, Marvolo started to eat. Elves were really good at showing their disapproval without getting outright impolite. And it seemed that they were equally
good at showing their approval. Now the only question that remained was how Marvolo had earned the approval of the elf bound to the Potter family.

If he didn’t ask, he probably would never learn what the reason was. But at the moment he wanted to relax and relish this delicious dessert, not ask humiliating questions.

Sitting in the common room in a chair near the biggest fireplace – a pair of seventh-years had vacated the seats as soon as Harry and Theo had come close – Harry read a book for his history essay, and waited for a mirror call from Marvolo.

“This is so strange,” Theo whispered from his place on a rug in front of the fire. “This spot is reserved for the upper years. That we are sitting here now is quite significant.”

Harry sighed. Everything seemed to be of significance as of late. The rooms he had to sleep in, the place where he sat to eat in the Great Hall, the seat in the common room he used to study… When being the Boy-Who-Lived had been tiring, being Heir Slytherin sorted into Slytherin was utterly exhausting. And complicated. Despite this, he still felt safer here than he had felt in Gryffindor Tower since the start of term.

“And sitting somewhere else would only cause trouble, right?” A startled Theo looked up, but didn’t have a chance to say anything before Draco, followed by Crabbe and Goyle, came over and sat down in the other wingback chair near the fireplace. The bookends took position a step behind the chair. It looked a little silly in Harry’s opinion. But it seemed to work on the younger years, making them avoid the Malfoy heir.

Draco just stared, causing Harry to roll his eyes. Sometimes this posturing got really silly. “I’m currently waiting for a call from my… father. So just spit it out.”

“But why?” was all Draco asked, a look of deep concentration on his face. It seemed as though he wasn’t sure what he should think. There he wasn’t the only one. Harry still was unsure what he should think about most of what had been happening. Most of the time he just played it by ear, and so far it had worked out pretty good.

“Because it’s the right thing? Because I’m not sure playing against my old team would be fun? Because it would be a bad move to change the team now? Take your pick.” Harry tried for unaffected, but was relatively sure that he had failed spectacularly.

Draco huffed and gave Harry a speculative look. Then he nodded and moved over to where Daphne and Millicent Bulstrode were arguing over the theory behind their latest transfiguration assignment.

While Harry was debating whether he should finish the chapter or go to bed, the mirror started to vibrate in his robe pocket. With a smile to Theo he got up and got the mirror out of the pocket. 

:Hello, sir:. Harry greeted hissing after he had accepted the call. A few of the still remaining students – all from fifth-year and up – turned to look at him at the sound of Parseltongue as he walked by on his way to the entrance to his room.

:Hello Henry. I’m sure you have already heard about the attack last night. I wanted to ask
how you are, and tell you what happened today at the Ministry:. Tired red eyes looked out of
the mirror, a few faint lines around the eyes spoke clearly of a trying day.

The door fell closed behind Harry, and he walked the few steps over to his bed, getting rid of his
shoes before sitting down. “Yes, I have seen the Prophet. My day was pretty normal. Classes,
homework… I was offered the position of seeker. I said I had to ask you for permission, my OWL
year and all that. Hermione and I decided on what to teach during the next club meeting. Nothing
too spectacular.” He frowned, should he ask? Who else could he ask without risking his reputation?
“What's the matter with the two wingback chairs near the biggest fireplace? Today a pair of
seventh-years left to make room for me and Theo. It was weird.”

Marvolo chuckled lightly. “Congratulations. I needed longer to get that much respect from the
whole House. But I guess you have an advantage, Henry.” He smiled and Harry had to agree, being
Heir Slytherin, and known for it, was an advantage to gain respect in Slytherin House.

“You look like it was a hard day.” Harry changed topics, not only because he was eager to hear
what had happened at the Ministry today.

Smiling at the pretty transparent manoeuvre, Marvolo started with a kind of report. “The most
interesting bit certainly was that the Aurors managed to get the evidence needed to prove that
Dolores Umbridge was the one to send Dementors after you. Tomorrow we will meet to judge her,
and she will be Kissed.”

Harry nodded, a little stunned, prompting Marvolo – who had been waiting for a reaction – to
continue. “The Aurors are searching for the werewolf responsible. The Carrows also search for
Greyback, because I’m sure he was the one to commit that… attack. Lucius and Xerxes work on
supporting the survivors. The next interesting part was the emergency meeting of the Wizengamot.
I think the old blocs are disintegrating.”

“Disintegrating?” Harry was intrigued. The old blocs of what was called light and dark in the last
few decades had played a large role in his lessons in politics over the summer. Even Madame
Longbottom had talked about them in the one meeting they had managed to have. It was almost a
given that two big groups of seats voted along the same lines, opposed to each other. A few
families stood in between, swaying the vote one way or the other. Others had changed blocs after
marriages, or the death of an old Lord. The blocs breaking up hadn’t happened in hundreds of
years.

“The stance on the status of werewolves and other magical, not completely human, beings I have
brought into the arena is shaking things up. The stances on muggle-born magicals, rituals, and so-
called dark magic are pretty much lined up. All who believe one thing on one topic agree with their
group on the other topics. But the opinion on werewolves doesn’t follow these rules. My attempt to
change the laws, challenge the old stereotypes, forces them to confront those differences.” He
rubbed his hand over his eyes, sighing. “I’m not yet sure if this is a good thing or not. Maybe we
can use this… but only time will tell.”

Harry nodded. If this topic had been universally ignored until now it would be reasonable to
assume that being forced to talk about it would change the dynamics.

Feeling sleepy, Harry decided that he would not draw this out, but ask what he needed to ask and
go to bed. “I already talked with Sirius today. He said that the Department of Mysteries has
released Regulus’ body, and he asked if I want to attend the funeral this weekend. I would like to.
Do you think Professor McGonagall will agree to let me leave school grounds for that?” Harry felt
a little apprehensive, to ask for special treatment felt somewhat wrong. It had been good that he had
been able to visit his parent’s graves, spend time with Sirius on Halloween. But asking for a repeat
still felt wrong.

“For the funeral of your godfather’s brother? I’m sure she will agree. I’m not so sure that the Headmaster will not try anything to prevent it,” Marvolo said with conviction.

They didn’t talk long after that, both tired from the day and eager to go to bed. Whenever Harry hoped it would get calmer, something new came up. Now the political scene was changing, the Headmaster was still intervening, Harry was still a horcrux… life wasn’t boring, that was for sure.

oooOOooo

With a thoughtful look, Albus watched the swirling green of the fire vanish behind Elphias, who just had left.

His old friend had been by to tell him about the day at the Ministry. To no longer be a member of the Wizengamot – either as the Chief Warlock or Regent for the Potter seat – was a rather large impediment for his gathering of essential information. But what Elphias had to tell might be another way to get a little bit of his influence back.

The happenings of the day, following the attack of the previous night, seemed to break up the old lines of the traditional voting blocs. If he used the scepticism regarding werewolves, he might be able to gather a new following behind himself.

But first of all, he needed to aim the Order at the werewolves and the victims. Without a clear agenda, because Tom was acting so oddly normal at the moment, the feelings of belonging and purpose were missing, or at least rapidly dwindling.

Albus sat down behind his desk and started to write an invitation to all Order members. Best to meet the next evening and ensure that everyone still was working towards the Greater Good.

While the quill scratched over the parchment, Fawkes the Phoenix watched the human he had spent quite a lot of years with together.

Chapter End Notes

I always thought that there had to be some secret society of elves behind the front of wizards and witches. Elves determined to care for their humans. And able to do so, largely ignored by those who think themselves so strong, and are so ignorant of so much of the magical world.

On another note, I feel that Sirius in canon has somewhat of a Casanova feel about him. When I remember correctly, the books (I do not speak about all the additional information from other sources) never mentioned a steady girl- or boyfriend for Sirius, nor a love interest of any permanence. So I decided to boost that aspect ;) Maybe he can find someone, but if he does, he will have to be dragged into a relationship kicking and screaming.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
And for farawisa's help in keeping the facts straight.

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Thursday 6th of November

After a whole day of teaching, and a meeting with the Dark Lord – the two-fathers potion so far looked like a success, the surrogate and child were well – Severus was now approaching the old derelict house the Order was using as Headquarters. With the obvious lack of violent attacks, they didn't have many reasons to meet. So after the big meeting when the Headmaster had revealed that the Dark Lord had split his soul to ensure his survival, their activities had dwindled almost to a halt.

As usual – and as he preferred – he arrived as one of the last, only the Headmaster still missing. The man was probably intending to make an entrance once all others were here. Lupin was sitting at the table, looking ill. Moody sat in one corner, his peg-leg sticking out in front of him. The Aurors of their group sat together, quietly discussing something. A small island of red hair indicated where the Weasleys were gathered.

A quick glance over at the table all were gathered around revealed that Molly Weasley hadn't brought any of her baked goods. As Severus had had to forego dinner for his meeting with the Dark Lord, and had declined a bowl of some sweet concoction the Dark Lord had offered – something with berries and much cream – he now was quite hungry. But without the almost traditional pastries, he would have to wait until he could return to Hogwarts before he would get something to eat.

The arrival of the Headmaster tore Severus from his musings.

"Thank you all for coming here." A bright smile and his customary twinkle behind the half moon glasses were prominent on the wrinkled face, badly hiding an expression of unease, maybe? Severus wasn't sure. That he could see anything at all on this face was telling in itself. Normally the Headmaster had masks as impenetrable as any Slytherin's. Severus assumed it was a trait all people associated with any form of politics developed over time. Sometime it was a blank mask like his, or some were so filled with emotions that everything of significance was hidden behind those displayed so easily.

"With the attack of last night, and what happened at the Ministry today, I feel it is necessary that we find another way to counter Voldemort's plans." The old man turned to Lupin and his smile changed into the fatherly – in Severus' opinion slightly condescending – one he often used on those who owed him. "Remus, my boy, Can you get in contact with the werewolves close to Greyback? We need to know if he truly was the one to stage this attack, and how Voldemort hopes to gain something from this."
Lupin leaned forward in his chair, a frown on his face. "You know that I'm too well known in those circles as the one that went to Hogwarts to get close to Greyback's people, Headmaster. And I doubt that Lord Slytherin had anything to do with this attack. Why should he do something like that? Judging by all the things he has done and said in public, and the lack of attacks… I think he might actually be working on reversing some of the things he did." The wolf looked a little unsure, one of his hands waving a little back and forth in front of him.

Moody snorted, clearly not impressed by the other's reasoning. "Do you think everything that man does happens in public?"

"No. Of course not. But you all have to agree that his public actions are clearly opposed to what he did… back then."

William Weasley cleared his throat, drawing all attention to himself. "I'm pretty sure he only survived rescuing me because he still has at least one Horcrux." With an apologetic smile to his mother the young man elaborated, "I read up on horcruxes after the incident at the underground lake. It was just so improbable that someone could survive being submerged in a lake filled with Inferi. But the information he has provided, the dismantling of that lake..." The wizard shrugged a little helplessly.

Severus refrained from rolling his eyes. Why did they all have such problems With accepting that one might do good things to hide one's true intentions? Or that deciding to change what one did was entirely possible. They all believed in second chances, but almost as often as they gave second chances, they condemned someone on the spot. It seemed more based on what they felt was convenient at the moment than some rules or principles.

It was infuriating. And a good way to manipulate them if you had a position of authority, or reverence.

Like the Headmaster did.

"After you destroyed the ring, Headmaster, I think it would be reasonable to assume he would gather the other horcruxes. To protect them," the young Miss Tonks – her hair changing from blue to a vibrant lilac – suggested.

Remus nodded. "I think he might even try to stitch his soul back together." The wolf looked like he was really hoping he was right, wanted to believe that this was a possible truth.

Severus watched attentively while the round descended into mindless, useless discussions that turned in circles around the same points again and again.

Molly Weasley quickly became agitated, a mother bear intent on protecting her cubs, Arthur tried to moderate her, but was clearly unsure and reluctant to commit to any of the positions present among them. The Aurors – Tonks and Shacklebolt – only added facts to the discussion, proving that Lord Slytherin hadn't done anything breaking any laws. Even that he went out of his way to avoid breaking them.

Severus only waited for when the Headmaster would call on him. It felt different to be a real spy among those that trusted him on the Headmaster's word, than it had when he had been a double spy, hoping that the old man would be able to be a shield for his one true friend. How things had changed. It no longer felt like a knife stabbing him through his heart when his thoughts wandered near Lily.

"Severus, my boy, do you have any news of what Voldemort might be planning?"
And here it was, the question he had been waiting for. In preparation, Severus had asked the Dark Lord what he might answer once it was posed.

Standing a little straighter, Severus turned his eyes from Mundungus – who had said in his circles no one had been approached by any Death Eaters – to the Headmaster. "If you want to hear plans for attacks or any other violent actions, I have to disappoint you, Headmaster. I only have been called to individual meetings. He is monitoring my experimental potions quite closely. He wants to hear about Mr. Potter as well." All eyes were on him, a position he didn't really enjoy. But if he was to take up the Lordship, he would naturally be standing in the middle of attention quite regularly. So he better get used to this. "But I have met Lord Lestrange, Lucius Malfoy, and Dawlish when meeting with the Dark Lord. They were either leaving his office, or arriving when I was leaving. I have also seen papers on the Dark Lord's desk leading me to believe that he is trying to gather funds in a newly acquired Slytherin vault."

It was true. As well as rehearsed. But that was nothing unusual. He had answered questions with rehearsed statements quite often. Only the roles of who helped him rehearse and who saw his performance had changed.

"I see. Thank you, Severus, my boy. If you see a way to gather more information, please do so." It seemed that the old man truly was desperate. Why else would he encourage his only spy to risk his life by being reckless?

Severus only nodded in reply, keeping the fact that his Lord used an awful lot of headache potions to himself. Maybe Lupin was right and the Dark Lord was trying to stitch his soul back together, and the attempts caused headaches. If this was truly the reason for the need for pain potions, why would the Dark Lord go through something causing him pain?

It was a point to consider.

"Why are we still doing this?" Mrs. Jones asked into the lull in conversation. She flushed a bright red when quite a few incredulous looks turned in her direction. "What?" she asked defensively. "We gathered because You-Know-Who was back, but the Ministry was denying it. There was a need to help guard the prophecy, spread awareness. But now the prophecy has been removed, and all and sundry know that he is back. The eyes of the Prophet and the whole community are watching his every move." The woman looked around, searching for those sharing her opinion. By what Severus could see from his strategically selected position there were quite a few who fell into that category. "There is no longer a need for us to work like this… be so secretive about it." Doge made to interrupt her but was stopped by Hestia Jones just talking over him. "I know that he still is capable of doing evil, but isn't that true of most of us? We all can do bad things. But we are no longer alone, right? All this meeting in abandoned houses… what have we really done?"

And another discussion started. With each passing minute the words got more heated. Body language got more aggressive. Molly Weasley yelled that she would not allow her children to be killed in a useless attempt to prevent a war. Which prompted Moody to ask if she thought the war was inevitable. If looks could kill, the old Auror would have died then and there, but Mrs. Weasley just yelled again that she believed there would be a war.

Amusement well hidden, Severus watched as the Order tore itself to shreds. The Headmaster tried to bridge the growing gap between those insisting that there was no way the man known as You-Know-Who – such an inane moniker – could act within the laws or with good intentions, and those willing to give a second chance to everyone asking for one. Soon people started to leave. Some – like Arthur Weasley – with reluctance and apologetic faces, others citing their wish to follow the laws – like Miss Tonks and her colleague Shacklebolt – and only a small percentage leaving.
without an explanation. That Mundungus Fletcher was among those didn't come as a big surprise. The man was an opportunist, getting money and free food to relay gossip was one thing, but coming in conflict with the laws when more than one Lord was involved was too big a risk.

For a short moment Dumbledore looked defeated, but that was quickly hidden. The remaining group was rather small. Severus was there – of course – Doge had remained, Alastor Moody as one of the Headmaster's oldest friends was still there, and Lupin was still sitting in his chair. Minerva and Hagrid hadn't been there to begin with, so their stand in this break was still unclear. But one thing was clear: after this evening, the Order of the Phoenix wouldn't be what it had been any longer.

"It seems," the Headmaster started, clearing his throat before continuing, "that we will have to start from the beginning. Keep your eyes and ears open. Search for those who might be willing to help us. Those able to look behind the public mask of Lord Slytherin to see Voldemort underneath it." He gave them all his benevolent, grandfatherly smile with his blue eyes twinkling, his patterned robes the only bright spot in the dreary room.

Once the Headmaster had dismissed them, Severus didn't wait any longer. He was tired and hungry, and wished to return to his quarters. That a full day of classes waited for him did nothing to improve his mood. But that the Order had almost self-destructed this evening was something most likely positive. They would need time to regroup and redefine their goals. So Severus had important information for his Lord when they next met.

But first, getting something to eat.

oooOOooo

Daphne sat still while Pansy brushed her hair in preparation for trying out a new sort of braid they had seen in Witch Weekly. This week's edition contained several articles on hair care. From new variations of time-tested potions for dry, greasy, limp, frizzy hair… all in all, for every kind of difficult hair, to charms to make elaborate hairdos. It was fun trying something new. So they did. It certainly was better than writing another essay on the best ways to prepare fertilizer.

The others were there too, Astoria getting her nails painted by Millicent, and Tracy on her belly on the bed, reading the Charms book. It was a cosy evening between friends, and at the moment not one of them was speaking.

Maybe she should bring up the topic most of the girls over thirteen had been thinking about since the re-sorting had happened. Or maybe even since this last summer, when the news of the scandalous adoption had made the front page.

"He looks rather fetching with the green on his robes, don't you think?" she said casually, checking her fingernails for chips or other places that might needed attention using the nail repair charm her mother had taught her as she had turned twelve.

"Oh yes! He does!" Pansy said with feeling, snorting at the end. "But do you really think his father will allow him to be with any of us?"

Daphne had to agree, it was highly unlikely that Lord Slytherin would agree to one of them being with his adopted son. At least not for a marriage.

"I can't marry him anyway. I'm the heiress. I need to find a younger son somewhere." She made the customary face she always made when this topic was brought up, eliciting the expected words of sympathy from her dorm mates and the equally customary eye roll of her younger sister.
"Don't be ridiculous, Daph," the younger girl said. "At least you'll be able to put in your opinion on whoever our parents find for you. I was never asked what I thought about that prat Draco Malfoy," That got them all giggling. It was no secret that Malfoy tended to whine if things weren't going his way. On the other hand, the well-known wealth of the Malfoys was an asset. As well as the boy's good looks.

"Well, we might not be the ones to marry him," Pansy said, setting the brush down on the bed, tilting her head to get a better look at the moving illustration of how the braid was to be done. "But the balls and parties of the winter season are coming up. He will need to dance, and maybe even have to bring a date to some of the events."

Daphne nodded, that was exactly what she had thought. With him escorting her she would get much more attention and might be able to get a few families with more sons interested. Maybe even some of those families more firmly on the light side of politics.

"There's no chance for me to get more than the occasional dance with him," Astoria sighed, dramatically tossing her head back one hand pressed against her forehead. "Mum and Dad certainly will insist I glue myself to my intended."

"Do you all already have the gowns and robes?" Millicent wanted to know, finishing up the nail polish on Astoria's hand before grabbing her wrist, wanting to cast a drying charm.

"No," Daphne answered for her sister as well as herself. "Lady Malfoy hasn't yet revealed the theme of the ball she's preparing. Mother always waits for that information. She informed us that she has arranged for a tailor to come by the day after the term lets out and the train takes us all back to London."

"I so hope that mum will allow me more than one set of robes this year," Astoria said, placing her other hand in Millicent's care to get the rest of her nails painted. They all knew that the older girls attended more than one event and got a gown and robes for each of them if the family was wealthy enough to be able to pay for it. Only small kids went to not more than one or tow events. And younger girls that went to more events would get to wear only one set of robes to all of them. Only if their parents regarded them as old enough – and mature enough – to be on the market to find a partner would they get more clothes.

"Does one of you want to swap with me?" Tracy asked from her bed, closing the Charms book with a gentle thud. Daphne tried to turn her head to look over to the only girl of her year that wasn't steeped in politics like the rest, but Pansy's hand in her hair stopped the motion.

"Hold still! I won't be responsible for you walking around bald if you don't hold still," her friend hissed.

The Greengrass family might be the most influential of them, but Bulstrode and Parkinson were equally involved. Davis, on the other hand, had Muggle relatives, and her mother was from an unimportant, small family, that only had been magical for a few short generations. Not long enough to rise to anywhere in the circles the rest of them frequented.

"We'll visit with my father's relatives. Those that know nothing of magic. We'll have to pretend all the time. And no magic!" She let herself fall onto her back gazing up to her canopy.

Daphne snorted, trying to not move while she felt gentle hands braiding her hair, parting it into smaller portions. That was something she couldn't let go uncommented. "Don't be sad, Tracey. Do you think we'll be at a party like we sometimes have here in the common room? It'll be all manners, stiff ballroom dancing, polite but incredibly dull conversation… but at least we'll get to
wear nice things, and maybe we can slip away for a moment or two.”

Tracy groaned. "Well, at least you'll be around magic. Able to speak about normal things, be yourself." To another snort from the four girls used to high-society posturing, Tracy laughed and amended, "Okay, maybe not entirely yourself, but you won't have to hide that magic is a part of your life. If I'm not careful with what I say, we can get in so much trouble for breaking the Statue of Secrecy. I truly wished we would celebrate with mum's family this year."

"How well can Pot... Slytherin dance, Daphne? You did take lessons with him this summer, didn't you?" Millicent wanted to know, while closing the small bottle of nail polish now that she was finished.

"He was a disaster when we started. But Lady Malfoy is a really good teacher. After a few lessons he stopped stepping on my feet." That made them all laugh, before they started on a recount of the winter ball at Hogwarts last year.

The conversation drifted to gossip soon after, and Daphne turned to ponder how she would get a few more dances with Harry than the other girls. She really felt that she would have to look for a possible husband soon if she was to find someone acceptable, and didn't want to be the target of gossip like that her friends were sharing with relish just now. Maybe it would work if she just asked Harry if he would be her date for one of the events they both were to attend. He was just such a kind of guy, willing to help. And as this wouldn't cost him anything, maybe even be in his favour by portraying him in a favourable light, it might just work.

Smirking a little when she imagined the look of bewilderment he most likely was going to sport when she asked, Daphne joined the others in a recollection of the older girls' reactions to Hermione Granger's date to the Ball during the tournament.

oooOOooo

Friday 7th of November

Lessons with the Slytherins weren't really that different from lessons with the Gryffindors. History was still a challenge not to fall asleep, Herbology still had those complaining that they had to work with earth and get dirty, the coursework was the same. Changing Houses really wasn't that big a deal when he only looked at the lessons.

But when Professor Flitwick said, "Good answer, Mr. Slytherin, take five points for Slytherin." it came as a shock.

Not sitting with Hermione and Ron was another difference. Theo and Daphne – the two sitting next to him most of the time – were different in their behaviour in class. Ron would give a quiet commentary or complain, Theo was concentrating and, unlike what Hermione was prone to do, didn't point out every minuscule error he made. It would take some adjusting to, but Harry was sure it would become normal quite soon.

He wasn't sure if it was a good thing that all the changes, all that he never would have guessed would be happening, would be normal soon. Only a few months back, he would have called everyone crazy if they claimed he would be living as a member of the Slytherin family in Slytherin at Hogwarts.

But the demands of OWL preparation, as well as the Defence club, provided ample distraction.

"Hermione!" Harry called as he spotted his friend on her way to the Great Hall, as he himself came
up from the dungeons. It was early for the club, but they had agreed to meet before the others would arrive, to talk a last time over what they would cover in this meeting.

"Harry!" Hermione answered with a smile on her face and her bag clutched to her side. It looked like it was overstuffed again. Maybe he should get her a bag with extension charms for Christmas? No, that was too big a present. Maybe he could give a hint to her great-uncle.

A few moments later the two moved up to the front of the Hall, deep in discussion over the planned lesson.

"What is it you two are planning to do today?" a smiling Professor Flitwick asked from the dais at eye level with the two teenagers.

"I thought we might go over the summoning and banishing charms. After we have repeated the spell from last time," Harry quickly continued before Hermione could protest and start a rant on the importance of revision.

Looking right through the manoeuvre, the girl rolled her eyes and huffed in amusement.

"That's advanced material. Why do you think it's useful in the context of self-defence?" the Charms Professor asked, clearly interested in their reasoning. Harry didn't doubt for one second that the man already knew of the usefulness of those charms in defence. During Harry's explanation the other students – still many more than Harry had expected for the first meeting – came in and started to form little groups, chatting excitedly.

When the time to start arrived, Harry got everyone's attention with a small bang from his wand. This was a spell he had looked up and taught himself after the last session. It was always useful to have a way to get everyone's attention quickly.

"Hello and welcome everyone! I'm happy that you all are back! We will start by going over the Expelliarmus once again, before Hermione and I show you the use of summoning and banishing charms as a way to distract your opponent. Please pair up. If there's an odd number here today, a group of three can work together. Hermione will go down the right side of the Hall and I will walk down the left side. If one of you has a question, or we see something, we're there to help."

It was clear that not all were happy that they were starting with the same spell they had been learning the last time. But Hermione had it right: if you wanted to cast a spell successfully in a stressful situation, you needed to be able to cast it in your sleep. And one only reached this state through constant repetition.

In short order all students were split into groups, and Harry watched Hermione walk over to a few first-years who looked as if they could use some more explanation on how the spell worked. Harry set out to walk among the students on the other side of the Hall, looking to see if there was someone in need of his help.

Most of the students seemed to get the spell right most of the time, but a pair composed of a Ravenclaw girl and a younger boy from Hufflepuff seemed to be having problems. While Harry walked over to see if he could help them sort it out, he spotted a group of giggling Ravenclaw girls – maybe the same age as Ginny – casting Expelliarmus at the other two, disrupting their attempts to practice. And whenever the boy or girl Harry now recognized as the girl he had helped against some bullies during the break at Sirius' trial – and from his runes class and practice – looked around, the girls pretended to be absorbed in practising themselves.

Bullies. Harry really disliked bullies. Cowards making fun of others, making them feel small so
they could feel strong, were among the most despicable people there were.

"What are you doing there?" Harry demanded to know, stepping in between the two groups.

"Nothing, just practising." Their too-innocent expressions, the mirth in their eyes, and the giggling, belied their claim. Harry was unsure what he could do to make them stop and not make the situation any worse for the target, as he had no doubt the girls frequently ganged up to act against the dreamy-looking girl with her wide eyes and blond hair.

"I think we should mix this up a bit," Harry decided on the spot. Breaking the group up might help defuse the situation during the club, and after he would go to Professor Flitwick. That situation was exactly the reason official clubs needed a member of staff to be present.

"You," he gestured to one girl of the giggling group, "will join the trio of seventh-years over there." When he was finished with splitting up and distributing them, he had paired the bullying girls with responsible older students. Some of the prefects, or at least near a group with a prefect and quite a few groups away from the girl they were targeting, as well as each other.

He wasn't sure they knew why he had done it, but the two the girls had bothered were practising peacefully, when Harry finally went to complete his round.

After that they moved on to the two new spells, explaining how summoning something from behind your opponent or banishing something into them could work quite well as a distraction, and that this was something they had to be aware of as well. Because something they could use to attack and distract also could be used against them. They were using hundreds of soft pillows to practice this, and in a few corners of the room Hermione and Harry had to break up some pillow fights, or gather loose feathers from exploded pillows. It was a mess, but once the meeting was over, the grins on most of the faces attested to the fact that it also had been a great time.

Before their Charms Professor could walk away – probably to his quarters for a quiet evening, or some marking – Harry stopped him. "Sir, I've noticed an instance of what looked like bullying to me. Can I speak with you about that, and how we might prevent it from happening again?"

"Sure we can, Mr. Slytherin." the professor agreed, nodding solemnly. He waved his wand to conjure three chairs in front of the dais to sit on. "Tell me what you saw."

It was almost after curfew until they had come up with a plan for how to act should something like this happen again.

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<br/>oooOOooo

**Saturday 8th of November**

Of course Professor McGonagall had approved Harry’s absence for Saturday morning and afternoon to attend the small family gathering to bury the remains of Regulus Arcturus Black. While attempting to flatten his stubborn hair – and not getting anywhere, as usual – Harry contemplated if it was a good thing or not. He felt he should be there for his godfather when the man’s younger brother was laid to rest, but on the other hand, he never had been to a funeral and was unsure what to expect.

The clothes Marvolo had send him via owl when he had asked over his mirror what was the right thing to wear to a funeral looked very solemn, making him seem paler than he was. Beside the shirt, everything was in black or shades of dark greys, his shoes polished to a subtle shine. Harry felt he needed to move carefully in those clothes, as he had done when wearing his family robes.
Either of them.

Giving up on getting his hair into some semblance of order, Harry slipped his wand into the sheath he wore over his shirt but under the wide sleeve of his robes. With this style and cut it was rather easy to reach a wand placed there. He wouldn't precisely be allowed to perform magic away from school, but Marvolo had insisted that he needed his wand to defend himself long enough for help to arrive.

With a last look in the mirror Harry left his bathroom and made his way through his room – grabbing his new winter cloak as he walked by the chair – down the corridor and into the common room. He had told Theo and the others where he was going, mainly because he didn't want any dumb rumours to start, and he had wanted to ask someone who might actually have experience with this kind of occasion for advice. The pointers they could give him hadn't been all that helpful, but Harry supposed it was better than nothing.

"Hey, Slytherin! You look like you're going to a funeral!" one of the older boys – if Harry wasn't mistaken it had been Higgs – called over, probably trying to make a joke at Harry's expense.

Not really having the patience for petty name-calling at the moment, Harry only nodded in the direction of where Theo and the others were sitting over their homework and revision, before turning back to the other boy, not really stopping on his way to the exit. "That's good then, as I'm on my way to one, wouldn't you say?"

He was to meet with his Head of House at the front doors so the man could take him to the place where the small family gathering was to meet. From what Harry had gathered, the grave would be on the grounds of the old Black family estate in the countryside. But they would meet in London.

"Professor," Harry greeted the man already waiting, in travel cloak and a black – what else – scarf, at the doors out onto the grounds. It seemed that it had started to snow since Harry had passed through the entrance hall after breakfast on his way down to the dorms to change.

"Mr. Slytherin," the man greeted in return, his normal impassive, closer to irritated than friendly, mien in place. "We will walk down to the gates. From there I will apparate you to the point where your godfather will take responsibility for you. Are there any questions left?"

"No, sir. I have no more questions." And so they walked through the slowly falling snow to the gates in silence.

Slipping his hands into his mittens, Harry contemplated once again the runes homework they had been assigned this week. They had to make a plan on how to use runes to keep something warm, or warming, for longer than any warming charm could manage. In a useful manner, mind you.

It would be really useful if his mittens, or the cloak, had a rune-anchored warming charm on them. Because even though they were made out of warm wool and lined in silk, they still only damped the cold. Harry still felt it. But fabric wasn't a medium one could etch or carve runes into. So how was he to apply runes to fabric? He could etch runes into a cauldron, or maybe even in a bowl made from wood. But as runes couldn't be used for heating something like a fire would, at least not without adding magic to it to activate such runes every time, it would be rather pointless.

Maybe he could paint them on? But paint probably would flake with time. So was there another way? It took Harry the rest of the way until he had the idea to stitch on the runes. Like embroidery. He would have to look up how to maintain the order of the strokes, but it sounded like it was a more durable and plausible method. It was a little embarrassing that he hadn't thought about this earlier. Some of his fancy robes had embroidery on them.
They reached the wards and crossed them. Professor Snape held out his hand for Harry to hold onto. This was the part Harry really didn't like. Why did all forms of magical travel with the exception of brooms make his stomach lurch?

Remus was already waiting for them in the entrance hall, and Harry noticed that the place had been cleaned and partially renovated since the last time he had been here. Sirius had talked about it, but seeing it in person was something different altogether. But it was obvious that a renovation was needed. Now that Sirius was Lord Black, he would have to invite people over, for talks and the like. He couldn't really do so while the house stayed in the state it had been in.

"Thank you, Severus, for escorting Harry here. We will bring him back to the castle after the funeral is over."

The Head of Slytherin House didn't say a word, but only nodded before turning with a billowing cloak to go back outside.

ooOoo

Sirius came down from his room, feeling a little apprehensive about the day's planned events. He had managed to keep the guest list relatively small. Or, judging by the looks the wizard from the Ministry who would oversee the process had given him, decidedly small.

The last male Black – as far as he or anyone knew – felt immediately better when he saw Remus escorting Harry deeper into the House. The teen looked rather grim in that much grey and black, but it fit the occasion and Sirius' mood.

Only moments later the door chime went, and Remus moved to open the door. Kreacher had been better since the portrait of Sirius' mother had been threatened with permanent silencing, and Lord Slytherin had retrieved the dark artefact the elf had been guarding. So there was no angry shouting from the witch in her frame when Remus opened the door, and no old, frail elf muttering under its breath.

"Narcissa, Lucius, thank you for coming." Both Malfoys looked paler than usual with their fair skin and blond hair, dressed in the dark colours of formal robes of mourning. At first Sirius hadn't wanted them to be there, but Remus had reminded him how close Regulus and Narcissa had been. And if he was going to invite his cousin, he couldn't very well not invite the witch's husband.

They both murmured a few appropriate words, and walked over to where Harry was waiting when the chime went off once again, announcing the arrival of the rest of the family.

"Mrs. and Mr. Tonks, Dora," Remus greeted the other Black sister not imprisoned, her husband, and their daughter.

Sirius greeted them and noticed that he was feeling oddly detached from everything. If he hadn't, he probably would have felt the urge to laugh at the uncomfortable look on Lucius' face when he was greeted politely by the muggle-born wizard Ted Tonks, and the sparks of mischief Andromeda didn't manage to hide in time.

Nymphadora took Harry along in apparition, and before Sirius could protest, Andromeda had captured his arm to pull him into side-along apparition. It probably was for the best, and just judging by that thought, Sirius knew he wasn't fit to Apparate anywhere.

Their small group met the grave-looking Ministry Official at the gates to the Manor and its grounds – it all looked a little abandoned, as was to be expected – floating a respectfully wrapped
body by his side. With the minimum of words exchanged, Sirius opened the gates, pulling on some weeds that were blocking their free movement, and fell into step behind the official and the body of his brother. Andromeda held onto his arm, offering silent support, while Harry walked between Dora and her father. The two Malfoys brought up the rear. In this fashion they walked up the front path to the big imposing Manor, turning to the left once they reached the overgrown evergreen hedges marking the entrance to the gardens. It was a rather gloomy scene. Water was dropping from bare branches, leaves were rotting on the ground, it was cold, but just warm enough that the water wasn't freezing to ice. Soon they reached the part of the gardens where generations of Blacks had been buried, passing by headstones and small memorials. Sirius had always wondered if this place was working like the rest of the normal world. It was enclosed by thick boxwood hedges, seemingly small from outside, but you could walk hours inside without crossing your own path once. Or so it always had seemed. Maybe there was some credence to the claim that the Manor had been built here because of the natural magic in the place. Either way, once the message had reached him that his brother's body would be released this day, Sirius had come here for the first time since his escape from Azkaban to find a resting place for his brother.

Surprisingly they hadn't long to walk before they reached the part of the graveyard Sirius had found. There stood an old oak tree which would provide shade in the summer, a bench of stone was there too, and a slab of natural stone Sirius hoped to transfigure into a memorial befitting his incredibly brave younger brother.

The official floated the wrapped body to the slab of stone and started on an obviously well-worn speech to honour the deceased. It lacked actual information about Regulus, but contained all the words expected to be uttered on this occasion. Sirius didn't really listen, and he suspected the others were lost in recollections and memories just like him. Maybe with exception of Harry, who stood between Dora and Ted, watching the proceedings with great concentration.

While the man from the Ministry spoke about a youth at Hogwarts, Sirius thought back to summers spend chasing each other around the gardens on toy brooms barely able to leave the ground. When he spoke about upholding family expectations, Sirius remembered two small boys hiding in the cloak racks, snickering about some old wizards and witches talking so overly politely during one of the many functions they hadn't been allowed to attend because they still had been too young.

Then it was his turn. He took a few steps, leaving Andromeda behind and turning around to face the small gathering. Lucius looked as stoic as ever, both Narcissa and Andromeda had tears in their eyes, flowing down their cheeks. Dora was standing by Harry and a sad-looking Ted. Sirius really was glad that he had decided to keep this as small as possible. If he would have had to talk in front of all those that had expressed their interest in being here, he was sure he would have had a breakdown or would have made a scene.

As it was, he barely managed to bring himself to speak. "For the longest time I felt my brother had made all the wrong choices. As I'm sure he thought of me. He found Death the moment he realized that he was on a dangerous path and tried to change it. I wish that I had been less stubborn in school, trying instead to keep in contact with my baby brother, protecting him as I always had promised. I'm sorry, Regulus. You were never the idiot I accused you of being. I hope I'll be able to make you proud now that I fill the role our parents wanted you to take."

Getting out his wand, Sirius concentrated on what he wanted to have as a memorial for his brother. It was at the same time draining and liberating to transfigure the stone into a tomb encasing the body, covered in depictions of plants his brother had liked the most. After a few moments the tomb and the bench matched, and Sirius let his wand arm fall to his side. He took a few tentative steps to lay his hand onto his brother's grave. There, in the flowing cursive he remembered from his grandmother Black's letters, was inscribed:
Harry sat on the green sofa listening to Ted Tonks explaining the modern mechanics of the stock market to an intrigued, if reluctant, Lord Malfoy. Andromeda Tonks and Draco's mother were talking about different family gatherings from the time they had been children, laughing every so often about something. Remus was standing nearer to the fireplace together with Tonks – she insisted on avoiding her given name – speaking quietly to each other. Sirius had snuck off some time ago, and Harry was really tempted to go after him. There was no one here he could talk to, and he felt decidedly awkward.

Gathering his courage, Harry politely excused himself and left.

Once out of the room and in the hall, Harry took a deep breath. Where could Sirius have gone to? Probably into one of the rooms that were out of the way? Regulus' bedroom? His own? Furrowing his brow in concentration, Harry quickly came to the conclusion that searching the house would take too long. The other adults would come looking for him if he took too long. "Kreacher!" Harry called the old elf. He certainly would know where Sirius was hiding, cutting down on the time needed to find his godfather significantly.

"Young Master Harry calls for Kreacher?" The elf looked better than the few times Harry had seen him during his short stay here. No longer dirty and looking like he would keel over any moment, the elf waited more or less patiently for Harry's orders.

"I need to know where my godfather is. Please tell me?" Whenever Harry had to interact with one of the elves, he heard Hermione's voice from last year in his head. Now he knew better, but her goal of improving the lives of house-elves prompted him time and time again to be polite. And he felt like this behaviour would serve him well.

"Master Sirius is up in the family living room, young Master Harry." Without being dismissed Kreacher popped away, probably to tend to the needs of the guests down in the formal parlour.

But as the elf had told Harry what he had wanted to know, the teenager didn't dwell on the odd behaviour but started to trek up the stairs to the room with the big family tapestry.

It was a short walk for someone accustomed to walking long stretches between classes from one part of Hogwarts to another. Opening the door to the room cautiously, Harry spotted Sirius standing in front of the dusty tapestry.

A few silent steps on thick, no-longer-dusty carpet brought him over to where the older wizard was leaning against the back of a loveseat, cradling a tumbler of some amber liquid.

"Hello, Harry." Sirius didn't look up, but scooted a little bit over to make room for him.

Accepting the unspoken invitation, Harry placed himself next to his godfather so their shoulders touched.
"Are you alright?" Harry asked, knowing that it was a dumb question. How could Sirius have been alright? But it was a way to start a conversation.

Sirius snorted. "No, not really. But thanks for asking. I take it you couldn't stand the others any longer either?"

"Well, it was quite fun watching Malfoy getting educated by a muggle-born wizard about shares and computer trading… but I felt out of place." The silently added I wanted to look for you, went unsaid.

Shaking his head Sirius snorted again, before he took a sip from his glass. "Well I guess that would be a funny sight."

They stood there in silence long enough that Harry started to look more closely at the tapestry, noticing all the burned spots where it looked like someone had pressed a lit cigarette to the fabric, eliminating parts of what looked like a family tree.

"That's the family tapestry," Sirius explained, waving his hand at the dusty piece. "I was on there once." The man stood from his perch to walk over and point at one of the burned spots. "Here, mother burned all of us who didn't fit her standards from the tapestry. Not sure, but I guess it damaged the magic, somehow. Look." He pointed again, and Harry pushed himself away from the loveseat to walk a little closer. "That's the place where Andromeda should be. Dora isn't on here, the way Draco is." Harry followed his godfather's finger at a place near where Narcissa Black was connected with Lucius Malfoy by golden thread leading to Draco Malfoy. Next to it Bellatrix and her husband were listed.

"I haven't found any written accounts of how it works. But I have studied it quite a bit since the beginning of the week. The first generation of children with another surname are listed, but not their spouses or children. Only those carrying the name of Black are on here. If it was different, your father and you would be included as well." A sad chuckle startled Harry, who had his hand stretched out, just hovering over the brittle-looking surface. "I guess it would get too big if all descendants from the one who made this tapestry would be included."

Sirius pointed at the bottom of the tapestry where the name of a witch and wizard were stitched in gold. "There were Blacks before that, but they aren't listed. I checked in the books containing the family history. I think it doesn't quite work the way the ancestry test offered by the goblins does."

"Do you think it can be repaired?" Harry asked, curious if it was possible and wishing there was something similar in one of the Potter properties, it would be great to look at all those that had come before him.

"I guess… maybe I should get a Charms Master to have a look at it. I… see this here?" Again Harry let his eyes slide to the point Sirius was indicating. There was a woman without a spouse listed, but with several children branching away from her. "I think it lists bastards as well. I wonder…" Long fingers traced over the spot next to Regulus Black where Sirius' name once had been.

"You think you… you could have a child you know nothing about?" Harry's stomach clenched. It was not a nice thing to think about his godfather, that he might have a child and hadn't cared enough to keep track of it. Or rather, her or him.

"Maybe? I don't know? I thought I have been careful, casting the necessary charms, using condoms… you know, being responsible. But it was a rather wild time after I graduated from Hogwarts. Auror training. I often went to muggle bars, found someone for a night, who also
wanted something without commitment, had fun, never saw them again. I stopped once you were born and your parents had to go into hiding. Had to keep a low profile, pretending to be the secret keeper and all… Then I landed in Azkaban… I hadn't thought about it until Remus brought up clubbing as a way to get rid of some of the stress."

Harry listened wide-eyed to this tale, trying to picture a young Sirius leaving a bar or club with someone he had just met there. He couldn't really imagine doing something like that. And he had trouble seeing it for his godfather.

"If this tapestry was working, I might know for sure. You know, because the name would be on there, I could search for them, offer assistance. Be there. I already screwed up my responsibility towards you, now that I've thought of it, know it might be possible, I want to make sure… be there if I'm wanted..." Sirius trailed off, looking sadly at his spot on the tapestry.

"I guess you better get someone to look at it then." Harry tried for cheerful but felt that he didn't quite manage it. He blinked slowly. "Do you think a child of yours would have magic?"

Sirius nodded without taking his eyes from his fingers slowly stroking the air above Regulus' name.

"And would be around my age. Not younger by much, and only a few years older?"

Another nod from Sirius prompted Harry to go on.

"There is Dean, you know… he once told me he isn't sure if he's muggle-born or not… his father left when he was a little kid, or so he says… maybe it's not actually true?" But Dean didn't look much like Sirius or any of the Blacks he had seen in the portraits around the house. It was just too strange to think about. But it could be, couldn't it?

Wide grey eyes landed on Harry's green ones clearly surprised by the very idea.

oooOOooo

Draco looked up from his rewritten notes from the last Herbology lecture when someone stepped into the common room relatively late. Just inside the door stood Harry, looking around the room lit only by candles and the fires in the fireplaces as if he was searching for someone.

When he spotted them – the girls, Theo, and Blaise were sitting with him – he did only hesitate the moment it took him to unclasp his cloak before he started to walk over to them.

"Draco, please tell me how you managed to get out of attending the funeral? I'm glad I was there for Sirius, but it would have been nice not to be the only teenager present. It got a little awkward during dinner." The heir of Slytherin slumped into the open seat near Daphne, and draped his cloak over his lap.

Draco smirked. His interest to attend the funeral of a man he had never known – family or not – and then to spend the rest of the day in the stuffy company of his parents and other adults had been as great as his enthusiasm for Binn's lessons. "And why should I answer that question of yours?" He feigned disinterest in the conversation by checking where he had left off copying his notes, which were smudged with something that looked suspiciously like mud. He loved to banter with his friends, teasing and playing tug-of-war with words. It was an amusement his father had always approved of. In the last few years – or maybe only year – he had started to see what the point of it was. Sadly, Crabbe and Goyle were not really adept at this, and therefore Draco found few partners for such sparring.
Harry snorted inelegantly, and flopped back into his chair, quite obviously tired from a day under constant scrutiny. "I'm sure that there'll be a few more family meetings where we'll have the fun of suffering together. I think I'll go to bed." Without reacting to Daphne's hopeful looks of offering comfort or a sympathetic ear, Harry stood, took his things, and walked to the entrance to the boys' dorms. Leaving Draco bereft of the gossip about the day's happenings. Now he would have to ask his mother or go without knowing. Maybe he should've have teased Harry so. It wasn't a big secret, after all. He simply had told his parents that he needed to study more because he was unhappy with his transfiguration work. And as that was true, it hadn't been so hard to convince them of the necessity of more study time.

Maybe he could correct the blunder the next day, when the Quidditch team practiced again.

Chapter End Notes

Any ideas for possible kids for Sirius? I'm really curious what you would want to see! Please tell me your ideas.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Next chapter planned for 28th of July 2017
Thank you all for reviews, ideas and support! Someone asked why I haven't recommended a story in quite some time. The simple answer is: it isn't really easy to find those gems among all the stories started that I want to present as especially worthy to be read. And I prefer to recommend those that are either finished or updated regularly. If you know of some story that I really should read please point me in the right direction!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Adjusting**

**Sunday 15th of November**

Harry was on his way back from the infirmary and his meeting with Mrs. Goyle to the common room. He had to place his newest drawing into his room and make it to the Quidditch pitch in time for the training he was to attend as one of the reserve players, before his new team mates would miss him.

This session had been especially hard on Harry. With the burial the previous day, it had been made clear once again that his new guardian, the man he had called *father* in front of the other Slytherins – for purely political reasons no less – had laid traps to kill. Had killed many times, to create that many Inferi.

But at the same time, he had talked to *Marvolo* the evening before, before going to sleep. Over the mirror the man had created for the purpose of offering Harry a way to contact him any time. Whenever he wanted to ask him something. He had even interrupted Death Eater meetings because Harry had called over the mirror.

There were so many contradicting emotions and thoughts whirling around in Harry's head.
Sometimes it felt like he was torn in two with his need for a family he didn't have to share with his friends, and the fact that he felt that he should hate the man who had killed his parents in the first place, removing the chance at a normal family for him.

Harry had asked Marvolo over the mirror if he was okay with Harry's playing as a reserve player on the team this year. Marvolo had asked if Harry had any trouble with his classwork, or felt that he didn't have the time to spare. The teen had denied any problems with his classes. While the essays had been getting ever more difficult, the material was starting to get more interesting... well maybe with the exception of Defence. But preparing for the club was a nice distraction and helped him to get deeper into the material.

So, no, he had no trouble keeping up with the homework and lessons. Even the meetings with Mrs. Goyle and his lessons with Snape for Occlumency didn't demand enough of his time that he felt he needed to drop something to cope.

Marvolo had then said if Harry – of course, the man was calling him Henry all the time – wanted to play, he was allowed to. The difference in activity, the physical exercise, might be even good for
him. In fact, the man had seemed rather perplexed at the fact Harry had even felt the need to get permission first.

So this morning over breakfast, Harry had talked with the captain of the Quidditch team, confirming that he indeed wanted to be on the team as a reserve seeker. It wasn't really a shock when he learned that the whole team had already planned on his attendance. It wasn't a big stretch to assume he would like to participate. And in fact, Harry was glad that he hadn't been forced to give up flying. It was one of the things he liked the most. He felt free in the air. And that was something that he really could use from time to time.

With practiced ease Harry stepped over one of the vanishing steps, deep in thought. The Gryffindors had been noisy about his visits to the hospital wing, it remained to be seen if the Slytherins were going to be the same. For some reason, the fact that Harry was seeing a Mind Healer hadn't been used to make fun of him. Almost a miracle, considering how easy it would be to use this against Harry. He only remembered too well how Dudley and his friends had used the made-up story of a child's mother going to a mental clinic to torment the youngster. It was highly unlikely that the magical world was any better in this regard.

Harry wasn't sure, but he thought he had seen a first-year Slytherin girl standing beside Madame Pomfrey, when he had arrived at the infirmary to walk through to the private room they were using for his talks.

Harry crossed the entrance hall on his way down into the dungeons, coming across a few students who had been late to breakfast. He felt a little better now than he had after waking up. His dreams had been tumultuous. Mrs. Goyle's advice always was good to help him find his way to deal with all the problems his life was throwing at him.

Today he had drawn a more abstract picture in stark contrasts of black and white. He wasn't yet sure what he wanted to do with it. Some he had kept, others he had left with Mrs. Goyle. Maybe he would burn this one.

Not bothering with the password that had been changed this morning, Harry hissed at the door to open. It was handy that Parseltongue was able to open the doors to the Slytherin common room. Maybe he should try if this was a password set on all common-room guardians.

"Harry!" Theo called over from the group of love seats, armchairs, and some stool-like seats that were heavily cushioned and made from leather, they seemed to be using most of the time. Seeing the fire merrily burning behind a metal screen, Harry decided what he was going to do with his work from today.

Rolling his drawing up into a tight scroll and folding it in half, Harry walked over to the others. He was determined not to let the past and expectations of others ruin his chance at a happy future. Marvolo was showing every day that he was caring for Harry, trying to do what was best for their community. Harry had heard the man make an oath to work as a Lord with an obligation to care for his people, and what the teenager had witnessed of the man's actions indicated that he was bound by that vow. Where was the reason to chase after revenge? He felt like it would be a useless endeavour.

No one could force him to love the man who had adopted him. But no one could force him to hate the man, either. It looked as if his best bet to lead a happy life lay with going with the flow. The Headmaster hadn't spoken with him in quite some time, and what Harry had heard about the old wizard's actions didn't sound like he was inclined to put Harry's best interest in front of many of his other plans. Sirius was preoccupied with other problems, such as discovering whether or not he was a father. The animagus didn't have the best record of placing Harry before his need for revenge.
Harry came to stand in front of the fireplace and extended his hand to let the folded paper fall into the flames. For a moment he watched the fire consume the drawing of his conflicting emotions, then he turned to look at the others and sat down on one of the last stools.

"Sorry for vanishing right after breakfast." Harry smiled at Theo, who looked speculative, before he turned to look at Draco. "When should we go up to the pitch?"

"Soon. I think we should gather our things and go now, actually," the blond answered, getting up from his seat, gathering his notes.

Harry followed, once again steeling his resolve to base his decisions on his goals and what was good for him, and not let himself be so heavily influenced by his need to get approval. He wanted to fill his position as the future Lord Potter the best he would be able. He wanted to make friends with those people he actually liked, regardless of their family, political association, or House here at Hogwarts.

Harry was pretty sure it wouldn't be easy, that he would have to remind himself time and time again. But Mrs. Goyle had promised to help him reach that goal, as she agreed that it was a good way to deal with the problems the situation he was in presented him with.

Seeking revenge, or wallowing in guilt, were less attractive routes to take from here. The Dursleys had always made it sound like Harry was responsible for everything that went wrong. But he knew – if not in his heart yet, at least in his mind – that this claim wasn't actually true.

ooOoo

On their way up to the pitch through the heavily falling snow, Draco snuck a few sideway glances at Harry, walking beside him. By now most of Slytherin House had pieced together that the teen had regular meetings with some kind of healing professional in the infirmary every other week. The first-year girl from this morning hadn't been the first seeing Harry heading there, or entering, or leaving.

Others had seen different Professors escorting a woman in professional-looking clothes into or out of the castle on the same days. Now that they had seen him take a potion every day with breakfast, it was clear as day that he had some long-term problem that was slowly being resolved.

But as Harry was the Heir of Slytherin, they hadn't said anything before – even if they had to make sure the younger years knew to keep their mouths shut – and now that he actually was in Slytherin House, there was no way they would spill something sensitive like that to the whole school.

Time to distract the other from his dark thoughts – judging by the deep scowl he was sporting – and to sate his own curiosity. "So, I gathered Aunt Andromeda was there yesterday? I'm somewhat sad that I didn't get to see father interact with her and her husband."

Harry snorted, and then rolled his eyes in Draco's direction. "That's a rather pathetic attempt to gather information, Malfoy."

A grin spread across Draco's face beneath the scarf he had wrapped around it. It would be, if the only goal had been gathering information. "Well, Slytherin, I'm really curious how that worked out. But I think you understand why I wasn't all too keen on attending myself. I'm neither close to Cousin Sirius, nor did I even know his younger brother. And I had to study! Herbology isn't my strength. And father expects me to do at least well. Everything beneath an Exceeds Expectations will get me into trouble."
"Maybe you wouldn't have such a hard time if you weren't so afraid of getting your hands dirty?" It was phrased like a statement, but it sounded more like a question. And Draco had to concede that it probably wasn't helping his practical work any that he really would prefer to not get his hands into the dirt.

"Well, not everyone is as accustomed to living in the dirt as... others." That had been close. He had almost referenced to the Weasleys, and if there was something Draco had learned in school, it was that insulting the friend of someone was a sure way to alienate the person one was talking to.

"You do know about water and soap, right? Or even cleaning charms? I can show you how to get your hands clean again. Maybe that will help with your grade?"

Draco had the sudden urge to stick out his tongue, but at the same time felt good for making the other laugh, because the amusement was clear as day in Harry's voice.

They reached the locker rooms and started to change while keeping up a conversation about Herbology. Draco was mostly complaining about what they had to do in the practicals. And that he really didn't think he would ever need it.

"Sometimes you really can whine, Draco. Maybe you should ask Neville – Longbottom – for help. He's really good with plants of any kind."

Draco had no time to answer that as the rest of the team and the few other reserve players came in, quickly discarding their cloaks. It seemed that the snow was falling faster.

"Hurry up, you lot!" Warrington barked. "The weather gets less pleasant by the minute, and I want us out there flying for at least an hour." The captain sat down to undo the ties of his boots, barking out more orders. "Slytherin, Malfoy, I want you both practising tailing an opposing Seeker. One of you will take the lead, the other will follow. Switch after a few minutes. Mind the stands and goalposts, I don't want Pomfrey screaming at me for encouraging your recklessness if one of you breaks anything." Once both of them had acknowledged the order, the seventh-year turned to the others. "We Chasers will work together with our Keeper. Passes and goal practice." All three included in that group nodded, while getting out their Quidditch uniforms to put on. "In this weather we can't stay up long. And after the disaster of the last time we practiced with bludgers in bad weather, I will not get them out again. Crabbe, Goyle, you will use those." Two bags were thrown across the room to the two Beaters who just barely managed to catch them. "These contain quite a few small balls. If one hits anyone, it will stick. At the end we will count. Each one sticking to you will cost you a Knut. Crabbe has the green balls, Goyle the silver ones. They whistle when thrown. Crabbe, Goyle, you get the money at the end."

Draco snorted. He thought Chocolate Frogs would work better than money, but he wasn't captain, so what did he know?

Following Harry around, or leading him into steep dives, and sharp curves in the still-falling snow and brisk wind, was really fun. No previous training session had ever been so demanding. With the heavy snow neither of the Seekers had seen much of what the others were up to, and if this had been a real game, it would have been almost impossible to see the Snitch.

When the timer Draco had set for an hour alerted him to the end of the time set for their training, the blond gave Harry the agreed-upon signal and the two of them turned their brooms to land. The whole team met up at the feet of the hoops nearest to the castle, in the wind shadow of the stands there.

"Let's see how our Beaters did." A few of the balls were sticking to funny places. One they had to
pry from Pucey's left foot. All in all, the Keeper – Bletchley – had the most hits, with over twenty, and both Harry and Draco had the least, with only three on their backs.

They were on their way back into the changing room for a hot shower and dry clothes when movement at the edge of the pitch drew their attention.

It looked like the Gryffindor Quidditch team had made its way down to practice. They needed to train a new Seeker, and therefore had been practising whenever they could the whole time since the re-sorting.

"Look, look, what do we have here?" one of the red-headed twins – Draco never had bothered to even try to tell them apart – drawled from behind his scarf and hat. "Slytherins decorated with sprinkles!"

"Do you reckon they're less sour with sugary sprinkles all over them?" the other twin asked in a mock-contemplative voice, holding his right hand to his chin, supported at the elbow with the other hand.

Draco felt his pride bristle at being mocked, but was stopped short by an amused snort from Harry. "With this much icing sugar on us all, I would say the lot of us here are as sweet as little kittens."

Draco blinked, totally derailed from launching into a rant, and took in their group's appearance. All of them were covered in a light dusting of white, including the Gryffindors who had just made their way down from the castle. And there was only more of the stuff piling on them the longer they stood here.

Laughter erupted around Draco from all the Gryffindors – Draco couldn't see who was behind the warm clothes to conclude who the new Seeker was – and even from the older Slytherins on the team. That broke the tension, and before Draco could get his bearings back, they had made their way over to the locker room.

Wondering whether Harry had planned the effect of his joke or not, Draco quickly got out of his clothes and under a hot shower, ignoring the others around him as best as he could. Communal showers were a concept he didn't like one bit.

After lunch the whole team gathered around one of the fireplaces in the common room to discuss tactics against Ravenclaw, the next team they would be playing.

The brooding mood Harry had been in after he had been off alone didn't return for the rest of the day.

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*Monday evening, 16th of November*

"No, Sirius, I will not prank the whole of Slytherin. Really, what do you think that'll accomplish? I just changed Houses because I didn't feel safe any longer in Gryffindor. Offending everyone in my new House sounds like a really stupid idea!" Despite the fact that he really did think it a stupid idea, Harry had to laugh. His mental image of all his Housemates with green skin and silver hair was too funny not to.

"Oh, c'mon Harry! We did something similar to all of Gryffindor once, and Ravenclaw... well to everyone. It was fun. And you're in a really good position to do it, too!" Sirius was clearly excited by the idea, and Harry smiled fondly, settling a little deeper into the cushions of his love seat by the fire.
"I never was one to play such elaborate pranks, Sirius. I don't think I should start now. I have enough on my plate. Adding detentions on top of it, seems to be a bit… I don't know … foolish?"

Giving a dejected sigh, Sirius slumped down into something to sit on, before grinning into the mirror. "You're more like Remus than me. He always was after us to revise more, to study." Sirius gave a mock shudder, startling Harry to laugh again. "But maybe you can integrate the colour-changing aspect into your Defence Club? Combine the idea with the small balls from your Quidditch practice and shields against physical attacks?"

Interested, Harry sat forward. "That sounds like a really fun exercise. Maybe only let small groups practice against each other, not only shielding, but dodging as well." Harry's mind was already planning how to facilitate this idea into drills and exercises that would fit the wide range of skills and experience the club had in its members.

"Before you go off planning the next meeting, I would like to ask for a favour." Now Sirius seemed nervous, or embarrassed, one hand mussing with his hair, his cheeks getting a little more colour. Harry was instantly curious what his godfather wanted to ask that would make him so nervous.

"Go on," Harry prompted him when Sirius hesitated a little too long for the teen's patience.

"Well, I wanted to ask you to get me the address of Dean's mum. I would like to meet her, see if I know her, if Dean could possibly be my son… I've been asking around for an expert to look at the tapestry, sent a few owls. But with a lead like that, I just can't wait. You know? I just have to make sure now! There are paternity potions to test if someone is the father of a kid. But I would need a guardian's permission…. So could you ask?"

His godfather looked so hopeful and at the same time so unsure that Harry had trouble saying no, as he wanted to. The prospect alone, of going up to the other Gryffindor and talking to him... it would be so awkward. "You know what you're asking, don't you? What should I do, walk up to him in the Great Hall and say something like, 'Hey, Dean, you told me once that your dad vanished when you were really little. You know my godfather could have been that man. Would you give me your mother's address, so he can go check if he shagged your mom?" Harry tried to mask his embarrassment with an exaggerated, cheerful tone. But his blush gave him away. Of that he was sure.

Sirius gave a rueful chuckle. "I know. That's terrible. Maybe a little more diplomatic? Don't you think if it is actually true, he ought to know as soon as possible?"

Now it was Harry tugging on his hair with one hand, while the other held the charmed mirror. If it was him, he would want to know. Maybe Dean would like to take over the place as heir, and if he did, he would need all the time he could get to learn what he needed to know.

But making contact would be hard.

"You're going to owe me big for that one, Sirius." Harry gave his godfather a piercing look, willing him to understand just what a terrible idea this was.

The relief over Harry's willingness to help was clear as day on Sirius' face, and the man gave a small sigh. "Of course, Harry. But you know that I'm always willing to help you regardless of that, don't you?"

"Yes, I know." It wasn't the first time Sirius was saying that. And Harry believed that whatever the situation, Sirius always would try.
To change the topic to something else, and something he was really interested in as well, Harry made himself comfortable again, before asking, "What are your plans for the winter holidays? Got a bunch of invitations? I'm not sure what events I'll have to attend, but I would love to go to one you're hosting."

They talked about the different invitations Sirius already had received, and those he was expecting. They would meet at least at the party hosted by the Longbottoms, and the one hosted by the Malfoys. Harry was starting to suspect that this year the Christmas Holidays would be a lot less relaxing than the years prior.

ooOoo

*Tuesday, 17th of November*

After lunch – there had been soup with sausages or roast with different vegetables and potatoes – Harry took a deep breath and murmured a "I'll see you later," to Theo before walking off to the Gryffindor table, where he had spotted Dean in a heated discussion with Seamus. Judging by the swinging arm movements, they were talking about Quidditch.

Harry quickly reached the Gryffindor table – dodging students leaving for classes – and quite a few eyes were trained on him. Some time it would be nice to not be the centre of attention. Just one of the masses, able to blend in with the surroundings.

"Dean, might I speak with you?" Harry tried to sound confident, friendly, just like a friend asking for some time to talk, not like he was making a formal request. He felt that he hadn't been all that successful.

"Sure. What's up?" Dean said, turning on the bench so that he sat with one leg on either side of it, better able to look at Harry standing next to him.

"Maybe somewhere more… private?" This was really awkward, and Harry was sure that he could have fried an egg on his face, so hot did it feel.

Dean frowned in confusion, but nodded, standing to swing his bag over his shoulder, motioning for Harry to take the lead. So Harry did, noticing with some depredation that Seamus, Hermione, and Ron had stood as well and were walking along behind them.

They needed somewhere private to talk, but Harry wasn't about to go all the way up to the Tower – not even knowing if he would be welcome there – and the dungeons were not an option either. So he aimed for one of the many unused classrooms near the Entrance Hall. Once he had stepped inside, Harry set his bag down next to one of the tables and turned to watch the parade of Gryffindors filing in behind him.

It was kind of comical seeing them all here, when he only had asked Dean to speak with him. Determined to get his task done, Harry turned to Dean, trying to ignore everyone else. And before Hermione could start on one of her rants, or Ron could demand what this was about, Harry started to speak. "My godfather asked me to speak with you and relay a request he has."

Dean only looked more curious at this – if it was even possible by this point – and quickly interjected a question of his own. "Your godfather, that's the one who broke out of Azkaban where he had been imprisoned without a trial and was innocent?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, that's him. As you can see, he wasn't in a position to do much the last decade and more. But now that he can move freely again, he has realized… that he might have a child
somewhere. You see, he was rather care-free after graduation and during his Auror training. He always tried to be careful, but... well. When he told me that, I remembered the time you told me that you really weren't sure if you were muggle-born, or if your father was a wizard. So I told him that you didn't know much of anything about your father. Currently he's working on finding a reliable way to see if he has a child somewhere, but until he has found that way, he would like to find out if he might be your father. So he asked me to ask you for your mother's address so he can ask for a meeting."

Harry had spoken rather quickly, watching the faces of the others go through several emotions, from anger to disbelief, always pressing on so the others wouldn't interrupt him. Now that he had said his part, he had to force himself to stand still, without shifting from foot to foot, fiddling with the hems of his robesleves.

Dean blinked a few times, processing the long string of words. Then he nodded slowly before a grin spread across his face. "Well, yes. It would be pretty cool to finally get to know my biological father. Mum always insisted that he was a nice bloke, but didn't tell much more about him. I love my stepfather, and all my sisters. But knowing the man who really is my father would be pretty neat. At least if it's someone as cool as your godfather, Harry. Shall I write the address down now?"

Feeling a little dumbstruck, Harry nodded, getting a quill and a piece of parchment from his things. That had been easier than he had anticipated.

Cursing himself a moment later, when Ron exclaimed, "What has Sirius done that he doesn't know if he has a child somewhere!" Hermione inquired, "How does he intend to discover any children he might have? Can you elaborate on that?" And then they started to talk over each other, not even making long enough of a pause to let him answer any of their many, many questions.

Once Dean had finished writing down the address, Harry made his excuses – hiding behind the need to study and do his homework – to leave the others behind and pass along the address to Sirius.

They were still talking loudly over each other when Harry turned into the corridor leading down to the dungeons. This wouldn't stay quiet for long.

oooOOooo

Setting down his mug of sweet hot chocolate, Marvolo took the stack of envelops and a few scrolls of parchment from his personal secretary. Bartemius had a professional expression firmly in place but Marvolo was sure that the twinkle of amusement in the man's eyes would have had the man cursed in years past.

"Have you sent out all invitations to the winter festival at Griffin House?" There really wasn't a good reason to punish Bartemius for his amusement over the tedious task of planning the winter season with all its many balls, festivals, and meetings. Even the fact that Marvolo really didn't enjoy the proceedings – and frankly dreaded the many people who more than likely would be garnering for his attention – and that Barty was amused by that, wasn't enough of a reason to cast a Cruciatatus at the man.

"I have, my Lord. Invitations have been sent to all on the list you provided. Inquiries have been sent to a few musicians and the elves have been informed to plan the food as well as the decorations," was the respectful answer, given with an equally respectful bow.

"Good. Now we only need to somehow manage to get all these invitations read, sorted, and
prioritised. It's simply not possible that Henry and I will be able to attend all those." A sweeping motion with his hand indicated the stack now resting on the surface of the desk between the two of them. Bartemius didn't react beyond a murmured "Of course, my Lord."

With a sigh, Marvolo took up his wand, levitated the first missive, cast a general detection spell on it, before he made a swish with his wand to open the envelope.

A card of heavy, cream-coloured parchment with flowing, elaborate cursive writing slipped out of the envelope. "This one is from Lady Malfoy, an invitation to the large Winter Ball she's hosting. We can't miss that one. So, block the day before Christmas for it." Marvolo looked up for a moment, noting that Barty was scribbling with his quill on a large sheet of parchment he had secured to a writing board with a sticking spell.

"The theme of this year is *Hospitality.*" Marvolo said with some exasperation. He had heard of the puzzling custom of selecting themes for large gatherings, but he wasn't sure why someone would need a theme. "Hopefully the tailor can work with that. Make sure to get an all-day appointment just after term at Hogwarts ends." The order resulted in more scratching noises, while Marvolo floated the letter from Narcissa into the *accepted* basket on a side table before he turned his attention to the next missive.

This was an invitation from the Longbottoms, another gathering they would have to attend. It had the usual heavy, high-quality parchment and formal writing in excellent penmanship. But this one contained a few words that had Marvolo thinking back over the last months at the Ministry and official functions.

And it seemed that Madame Longbottom was right. Headmaster Dumbledore really did seem to have withdrawn from the public. Since he no longer was an important part of the Wizengamot – as he held neither the regency for the Potter seat, nor the position of Chief Warlock – he hardly had to be present anymore. But he hadn't been at the Ministry on any of the days Marvolo had been there to discuss something with the other Members, or some department head. The old man hadn't even been mentioned by one of those normally closer related to the Headmaster's favoured politics over the last weeks.

Marvolo didn't believe for a moment that the man had decided to concentrate on the school and withdraw from the field of politics otherwise. This was a worrying development. What was the man up to?

Narrowing his eyes, Marvolo levitated the invitation to Longbottom Manor over to Barty, before he summoned the small satchel waiting for him to move the papers in it back to Headquarters into his hand. With a few efficient movements, he got out Severus' written report on the last Order meeting. They hadn't managed to find a time to meet in person, as Severus was working to organize his marriage to Sonja Jiggers, and Marvolo had too much to do as well.

Breaking the seal on the thick stack of parchment, Marvolo started to read. It looked like the Order of the Phoenix was breaking apart, but Severus also stated his concerns that his impending marriage might put his own trustworthiness in the eyes of the Headmaster into doubt. Marvolo had to concede the point Severus was making. As the spy no longer gave any useful information on the *Dark Lord's* movements and plans, and would be marrying soon, as well as taking up the mantle of Lord Prince – and all that without consulting the old man for his advice – it was more than likely that he would lose credibility with the wizard. The quality of information Severus had been able to bring back from the Order had started to decrease. Maybe it was time that he started to search for another spy, or stop relying on one altogether.
But for the moment planning the winter holidays for Henry and himself was more important. There was no way Marvolo would be able to influence what his old Transfiguration professor would think or do.

Scoffing at his own nervousness, Severus raised his hand to knock on the door to Minerva's quarters. Sonja and he had come to the conclusion that they wanted to marry this month, so they would have some time to themselves before Severus would claim the title of Lord Prince during the December session of the Wizengamot.

She had asked a good childhood friend to be her witness, and he had decided to ask Minerva to stand by his side during the short ceremony they would have.

But he had to ask her first. It was kind of ridiculous that he felt even more nervous now than he had when he had asked Sonja for her hand in marriage.

After his short decisive knock, it took only a moment for the door to open and reveal Minerva standing there, lacking the hat she normally wore around the school, and in comfortable robes as well as slippers. "Severus! What a surprise, come in!"

As he normally avoided socializing with the other professors, Severus wasn't surprised that his older colleague hadn't expected to see him. He sat down when she pointed at a comfortable-looking chair, and accepted the cup of tea she offered him.

After a few moments of silence, Minerva rolled her eyes at him, huffed and started to speak. "You didn't come here for company, Severus. Normally you seem to quite enjoy being alone. And I guess if you wanted company, you would have gone to visit that young lady of yours. So out with it! What has you so tense?"

Severus chuckled. Her no-nonsense attitude was a nice change of pace from most of their colleagues, who tended to be much too kind and diplomatic for his taste.

"You are right." Severus played with his ring, a much simpler version than the one Sonja was wearing, before he took a deep breath and steeled his resolve. "I came to ask if you would grant me the honour of being my witness for the marriage ceremony."

Before he managed to explain more, or even mention the date Sonja had set, Minerva had set her teacup down, crossed the small space between them and had drawn him to his feet. Clapping her hands on his shoulders before giving him a hug, Minerva was beaming over her whole face. "I'm so happy for the both of you! Of course I'll be your witness! I always feared you never would find someone to walk by your side through life. When will the ceremony be held, and will you both be living here at the castle together?"

Carefully extricating himself from Minerva's grasp, Severus sat down in the chair again, smiling. "I hope that I will get permission from the Headmaster, but I fear my position could get precarious soon."

With a frown on her face, Minerva turned to pick up her cup, before sitting down again opposite from Severus, obviously prepared to listen to his reasoning. "Why should your position become precarious? Albus trusts you, Severus. He's said so many, many times."

"Has anyone told you about the last Order meeting?"

She denied this with a shake of her head.
"Things aren't going so well. Lord Slytherin is acting in ways that Albus doesn't seem to expect, or accept, as truth. The fact that I will marry soon, and my inability to give him information that matches his expectations, among other things, will cause his trust to waver. I'm almost certain about that."

A raised eyebrow commanded him to elaborate on that. Taking a sip from his tea, Severus contemplated whether it was worth the risks to tell Minerva more. In the end, the Headmaster's knowledge about the guilt he had felt for relaying the parts of the prophecy he had overheard, and his ability to wield that guilt, and the unrequited love for Lily, to get Severus to do what the old man wanted, were the main reasons Albus did trust him. When the man started to doubt that he still could use this, which would happen soon, Severus might need an ally on staff.

Deciding that Minerva probably would be appalled by the Headmaster's scheming, Severus started to tell the story of his turn from the Dark Lord to be a spy, and why he believed that the Headmaster's trust in him might start to waver soon.

They spent hours talking, until Severus left in the early morning hours to catch a few moments of sleep before he would have to get up again for another day of teaching. He was confident that he had won an ally today. Minerva hadn't been impressed by the way Albus Dumbledore had used Severus' need for redemption to get what he wanted.

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Wednesday, 18th of November

Xerxes sat at the back of the classroom, looking on as the Healer, together with Fabian and his wife, held a talk about healing of teeth in the muggle and the magical worlds. The children listened attentively, the younger years – as well as many of those who grew up among magicals – truly fascinated and a little horrified by what they were told.

This was the first in a series of planned events where one of those Muggles who knew about magic through their children – most of them parents of children attending the school – would talk about their field of expertise alongside a witch or wizard working in a similar field. It was to show pureblood children that Muggles had found a way to solve problems without magic, and for the muggleborn to learn how some occupations translated over to the magical world.

Xerxes was optimistic that it would work well.

For one, it seemed to make the parents without magic of their own be more at ease to have an opportunity to be involved in their children's education.

The next talk would be held by a veterinarian and a magizoologist. Xerxes planned to attend then as well.

While he observed the children listen, Xerxes pondered their progress. It was a shame that the goblins were so reluctant to perform more ancestry tests, having set up a monthly limit of only four tests to be conducted. As there were always those needing a test performed for marriages, or to clear up who was going to inherit something somewhere around the world, it was a struggle to find a slot to let one of the muggleborns they had rescued be tested. Therefore they hadn't managed to get very far with their hope to place the kids with actual family.

So far they had rescued nearly forty children under the age of eleven from unsuitable living circumstances. They had lived on the streets, in foster families, or institutions for mentally ill children. One of those showed signs of the sight. All in all, Xerxes wondered how many of those
children would have still been alive by the time they turned eleven if they hadn't been found now.

London was happy as well. Even though he was still unhappy with the fact they hadn't found any
older children on the streets who should have gotten a letter from Hogwarts, but never did. There
had been hints. But considering that children who had lived a few years on the streets normally had
problems with any kind of authority, or even adults in general, it wasn't really that surprising. So
the older Squib worked together with a muggleborn wizard with a degree in social work to spread
rumours that there was someone willing to help without asking many questions. They had to be
careful to not get into the reputation of abducting children for nefarious purposes. Not an easy feat,
as the children they found did disappear from the streets and the muggle world.

"Do you have questions?" Jean asked, smiling kindly at the children and some of the teachers
standing in the back, just like Xerxes eager to learn more about a world they had largely ignored
until now.

Xerxes watched a small boy – maybe four or five – walk over to the back of the room, where there
was a shelf with books and a low table with a terrarium containing the snake Lord Slytherin had
donated to the school. As the boy walked over to one of the female teachers, getting her attention
by pulling at her sleeve, Xerxes turned his attention to London, walking in through the door
leading out into the gardens.

"Yes?" The old Lord asked of his slightly younger employee.

"It seems I might have managed to make contact with a young wizard, I think he is fourteen, living
in Liverpool. We arranged for a meeting tomorrow. He is suspicious of my claim that magic is real
– especially because I couldn't show him any – but he agreed to let me bring someone else who can
show him magic."

"Sounds like a plan. I guess it will take some time before the young man will consider moving
here?"

"I feel it is most unlikely that he will agree to come here at all. But maybe he will agree to learn
some things, and help get others like him off the streets as long as they are still young enough. At
least in Liverpool." London spoke quietly, keeping an eye on the front of the room, where Jean
answered one question by displaying an enormous model of a set of teeth being brushed by an
equally enormous toothbrush.

"Tell me how it turns out, will you?"

The other nodded, leaving Xerxes relieved.

It was sad to admit that those young magicals living on the streets either died young, or took so
much damage to their ability to trust and integrate into a society with rigid rules that they most
likely would never be part of their community.

Moments later London already had left again, leaving Xerxes alone to watch the end of the
question-and-answer session. Smiling, the old wizard was only partially paying attention to the
adults talking to the children, or the teacher and the small boy over by the snake tank, changing out
the water.

He felt that his sister would have been proud of him for what he was doing with this school. There
were only a few Squibs currently learning here, but they would have a chance to stay in the
community they had grown up in, keeping in touch with magic. Maybe they would be able to
change the perception of Squibs in society. It would probably take years, if not decades, or even
generations to accomplish this great goal. But a start had been made here.

And soon there would be an experienced Herbalist on staff as well. They would be able to grow their own potions ingredients and hold lessons for the older children. That the man now was infected with lycanthropy wasn’t a big concern in Xerxes’ eyes.

With a big smile Xerxes walked over to his nephew and the man’s wife. ”Thank you two for coming here today! What are your plans for over the holidays?”

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*Friday, 20th of November*

After the latest Defence Club meeting, Harry was now sitting in his rooms, writing the last lines of the conclusion of his potions essay. It was rather late already, as he had talked with Sirius over the mirror just after the Defence Club meeting had been over. This time Hermione and he had split the students into groups from the beginning of the session, introducing the Protego into the number of spells to be practiced.

Because Harry had paid attention, Luna – the blonde girl from his runes class who had a funny way of talking – had been far away from those that had bullied her the week prior. He had walked by her and her group a few times, walking past Cho Chang, the Ravenclaw Seeker, with her wonderful black hair a few times. Her smile was doing funny things to his stomach.

Shaking his head, turning his attention back to his essay, Harry checked if he had included all the facts he had listed on a spare bit of parchment. As it seemed he had managed to include them all, Harry cast a drying spell Hermione had shown him on the scroll, before rolling it up and binding it with a small green ribbon.

He hadn't spoken with Marvolo yet, so after he had cleaned the quill he had been using, and had screwed the inkwell shut, Harry got out the mirror Marvolo had charmed for him, and walked over to the rug in front of the fireplace. The weather had only gotten colder over the week, prompting Harry to always keep a fire going in the fireplace when he was in his rooms. But still, this was the most comfortable place in his rooms. Some of the other Slytherins had taken to wearing their scarves constantly, along with more than one sweater, to keep the cold at bay.

His call was answered almost instantly, showing Harry that Marvolo truly kept the mirror with him at all times.

"Henry, how are you?" The man on the other side looked tired, his red eyes small, the brown hair mussed.

"I'm well," Harry said, making himself comfortable with his back to the fire, relishing the warmth. "I just finished the potions essay I had planned to finish today."

"So, still on top of the work? I remember that there were quite a few nervous breakdowns when my year took their OWLs." A small chuckle made its way over the mirror. Still a strangely human sound to come from the wizard still – if only in secret – being called the *Dark Lord*.

"Not yet, but Hermione always harps on that we need to keep on top of our work. Ron is going to strangle her sometime soon if she doesn't ease up a little about it." Harry smiled in remembrance. His two friends got into these squabbles quite often when they were studying together in the library.

"Talking about stressful times," Marvolo changed the topic rather abruptly. "Barty and I have been
planning which events we will have to attend. Some take place when you are still at the school, so you will be spared those. But there are quite a few to which you will have to accompany me. To at least one, you should ask one of your classmates to be your date. One of them will be the small gathering we will be hosting. I have already included invitations to your friends, and those of your classmates who have influential families." Seeing that Harry wanted to interrupt to ask a question, the red-eyed wizard elaborated on the specifics. "I invited Miss Granger as well as Mr. Weasley. A total list is on its way to you via owl. The letter also includes a list of the invitations we can't decline and when the dates are. If there are still things you deem unclear, you can ask me via mirror the evening after the owl has reached you."

"Sounds good," Harry said and then sighed. "Will I have any time to myself?"

"I have tried to keep enough days free so you can finish the homework you will undoubtedly get."

Harry groaned at that, getting only a laugh in response, causing the teenager to scowl.

"I feel for you, Henry. But we both can't escape our duties and the expectations heaped upon us. At least you can hide behind me in regard to matchmaking mothers. I fear I won't be as lucky." That got Harry chuckling. Imagining eager witches hunting down Marvolo to trap him in marriage was somewhat funny, at least until the moment he realized that any woman Marvolo would marry would instantly become his stepmother. He didn't feel like he wanted one. Having an adoptive father was hard enough.

"And the small family gathering your godfather is hosting, as well as a ball at Longbottom Manor, and one over at Xerxes' place are on the list. I think it is likely that you will enjoy those at least."

"Probably," Harry said doubtfully. "Oh, Sirius will be in Hogsmeade tomorrow." Harry said, sounding happier, as he thought back to the conversation with his godfather earlier that evening. "He thinks that Dean from my year – a Gryffindor – could maybe be his son, and therefore he has asked Dean's mother if she agrees with testing to see if it's true. They plan to meet up tomorrow. I plan to go there with the others, meet Sirius, have a good time… I'm allowed to go to the village without an escort now, aren't I? I mean, with Bellatrix Lestrange caught…" Harry knew they hadn't really spoken about this, but he was aware that the Death Eaters who had escaped from Azkaban hadn't really died in that fire in France, but were hiding out at the house Dorea had been given as a gift for her marriage to Harry's grandfather on the Potter side. More than once a call on the mirror had interrupted Marvolo while planning with the Lestrange brothers how to give them a new identity, or the man's discussions with Rookwood on some obscure magical theory or other. So the danger wasn't as gone as the public believed, as the Death Eaters weren't dead. But it should be gone for Harry, as they had been in contact with Marvolo.

"There is no reason for you to fear the escapees any longer," Marvolo assured Harry, again not really confirming in words that he had instructed those wizards to stay away from Harry. "But there still might some dangers lingering out there. To keep you as safe as possible, Crabbe and Goyle senior will meet you at the gates." Harry's sigh and eye roll was met with a pointed look, staying the words of protest Harry felt at the tip of his tongue. There was no way he would be getting out of this one, so there was really no reason to argue the point.

"It is late, and I feel we both should be in bed." Marvolo stated, getting up from the chair he had been sitting on, giving Harry a short glance at the shelves in the background as he started to leave the office at Griffin House. "Have fun in the village tomorrow, and call once you are back in the school. Sweet dreams."

"Sleep well," Harry answered. He hoped that he would have a good time the next day in Hogsmeade having to split his time between the Gryffindors and the Slytherins likely wouldn't be
easy. His desire to see Sirius too, might make it all the harder. And along with all this, he needed to come up with ideas for his friends, and his guardian for Christmas. What could he get the man? What would he even want? Getting up to get ready for bed, Harry snorted. If he didn't manage to come up with a decent idea, he just would buy a really big basket full of sweets from Honeydukes. The way Marvolo always ate sweet things, that should be at least an acceptable gift for the man.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your many ideas of who might be Sirius child, or if he even has one or even more than one :) as is often the case it will be absolutely impossible to make you all happy. But I hope you will find my way to deal with it at least logical ;)
The list of thinks I plan to include still is rather long, and I feel it probably will stay long for some time yet. Your reviews and talks with my sister and the two wonderful people reading over the chapters to get the most embarrassing errors out always tend to spark more ideas!

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Next chapter planned for 11th of August 2017

Story recommendation: "Morphed Secrets" by nightkitty555 (I found it over at FFnet)
It is a nice take on the Harry is Severus' son theme. I feel I might have been influenced by this story in my portrayal of Sonja.
Another chapter. It is brought to you with the help of all those writing reviews keeping my momentum alive! Special thanks this time to DreamOn. Your review came at a moment where I desperately needed some encouragement. So thanks very much to you all for the support.

This is the edited version. I hope that there are now quite a lot less errors ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, 18th of November

As Dean had asked Harry to accompany him to the meeting with Sirius, and as Snape had insisted that he – as at least a somewhat competent student, able to follow directions – was to prepare and conduct the test, Harry was walking down to Hogsmeade together with the other Gryffindors. Theo and his other friends in Slytherin were walking on their own, planning to meet up for lunch at the Three Broomsticks later on.

“And what’s in there?” Dean asked, pointing at a small satchel Harry was carrying over one shoulder.

They just had reached the big gates to the Hogwarts grounds where two adult wizards, bundled up against the cold, were waiting for them, silently falling into step behind the small group without a word.

Harry ignored his bodyguards in favor of answering the question, while Ron scowled. The redhead was unhappy with what he claimed to be Death Eaters following Harry around. If only the other had known how close to the truth he truly was.

“That’s everything we’ll need to test if my godfather is your father or not.” Harry wiggled the satchel a little, resulting in the sound of glass and metal tinkling against each other.

“Why are you the one to conduct the test?” Hermione asked, turning back for a moment to look questioningly at Harry and the others. “Wouldn’t it be better to ask an experienced potioneer? Like the one working at the apothecary in Hogsmeade?”

For a moment Harry wondered if she was miffed about the fact that Harry had been asked, and not her. She had been consistently better at Potions than Harry had been in the last few years. But that wasn’t really the point here.

“Not sure.” Harry shrugged, because he really wasn’t. “Sirius asked Professor Snape to help do the test today. But as the Professor had other duties to attend to, he got me out of bed early this morning, dragged me down to his potions lab, and made me do this test a half dozen times.” Harry snorted. “I’m absolutely sure that he isn’t my father after that.” In a way, this was some kind of twisted compliment. Or maybe Snape had done it to make sure Sirius wouldn’t come complaining should the test not produce the outcome the man wanted.
Harry’s disgruntled expression must have looked quite comical, as the Gryffindors walking with him started to laugh before they all hurried up. They were to meet Sirius at the Three Broomsticks, where he had planned to rent a room, and it wasn’t getting any warmer, so they had all reason to make haste for their destination.

ooOOoo

They had decided to walk down to the village as an opportunity to enjoy the weather. It wasn’t snowing any longer, but the white stuff covered everything, making for a nice landscape to wander through. Draco was walking up front next to Astoria, followed by the girl’s older sister Daphne, while Theo walked fast enough to avoid Pansy and Millicent, who were following closely behind him.

“Have you heard the rumours about Lord Black?” Millicent asked with a squeal in her voice. The girls were much too excited about those stories told at all the tables in the Great Hall, and between lessons in the corridors. After some Gryffindors had started to speculate about Dean Thomas and the possibility that the boy was a half-blood, as he didn’t know much of anything about his father, the story had quickly made its way around the school. Combined with a few old stories about Sirius Orion Black going after anyone even only remotely interested while he was at Hogwarts, and during his Auror training, it made for prime gossiping material.

Theo tried to ignore the giggling and whispering, concentrating on his plans for presents he wanted to find during the day in the village. He needed something for Aidan, his younger brother. Theo grinned. It was something new to get regular letters from a younger brother, to have someone to care for. Maybe a pack of Exploding Snap cards, or a few pranks from Zonko’s would be the right thing for him. At least Theo was sure he wanted to get something obviously magical that would be fun to play with. Something he had had fun with when he had been Aidan’s age.

It didn’t take long for them to reach their destination, where they split up into pairs, to go search the shops around the village for presents to give to friends and family. Draco walked through the snow at Theo’s side, and they both were silent when they made their way over to one of the smaller stores offering books and assorted little trinkets.

“Do you think that Lord Black will find an heir from one of his many affairs?” Draco asked without preamble.

Theo slipped out of his gloves, folding them and storing them in his cloak pocket, and started to sort through the children’s books stacked on a table just past the entrance. Maybe he would find some fairy tale for Aiden among them. “Well, if there is anything to the stories, he might find someone. And considering the puzzle presented by Henry’s mother and Heiress Lestrange, he might even find some descendants from a squib line and a likely heir among them.” He shrugged. Draco was the heir to the Malfoy family. Why he still thought about the possibility of becoming the heir to the Black family as well... True, Draco was one of the last Blacks left, but only in the maternal line, so Sirius Black had a greater claim on the title. And he was still young enough to have children, might even already have a child somewhere.

Draco growled low in frustration, “Can you be any more evasive, Theo?” as he looked at small trinkets on a shelf near the table Theo was searching for a book. “How is it, being a big brother? It seems that I will become one soon, and I think it would be best to prepare…”
Seeing the insecurity and honest curiosity on his friend’s face, Theo started to relay the few things he had learned about being a big brother. After all, Aiden hadn’t been part of their family for all that long, and a lot of the time Theo had been at Hogwarts and therefore away from home.

They managed to find a few little tokens for their friends, and a book for Aiden, before they made their way to the Three Broomsticks to meet up with the others for lunch. The number of presents to get this year was somewhat larger than in years past. Getting to know Henry and his friends in Gryffindor had expanded the circle of people he was obligated to give something to. As well as the group of people he wanted to give presents.

Would it be all right to get them all some generic sweets? Or did he need to get something more? It always was a rather delicate balance the first few times.

ooooOOooo

After a rather quick breakfast, Minerva had made her way up to her quarters to gather the two clothing bags containing Severus’ and her own formal robes. Today was the day her erstwhile student was going to marry. And she was one of the few people invited. The whole secretive cloak-and-dagger routine around it somehow made it even more thrilling.

Chuckling a little to herself, Minerva wondered how old she really was to entertain such young-girl thoughts about drama. But she suspected it was better to enjoy the secrets as if it were a good prank, than be sad about the fact that it seemed necessary to use secretive means in preparation.

Severus had sent his robes to her and asked her to bring them along to the Leaky Cauldron so he would be able to claim gathering ingredients as the reason he would be away the whole weekend. So the animaga checked if she had everything before she stepped up to her floo in the office. She already had told the Headmaster that she would be out for the day, for a nice family gathering in London. As she considered Severus something like a nephew, it wasn’t a real lie.

At least she didn’t intend to keep up the pretence for long. She would see to it that Severus and his bride would be welcome at Hogwarts. She understood why Severus deemed it necessary to keep the marriage from the Headmaster before it was set in stone, but after this there would be nothing the old meddler – always thinking he knew best – could do to dissolve it. Then she could give the man a piece of her mind.

ooOoo

After changing in a room up in the Leaky Cauldron – if the owner didn’t do something soon, it would start to resemble one of the better establishments down Knockturn – Severus briskly walked down the stairs into the main room, where Minerva was waiting near the bar.

She smiled warmly up at him, causing an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. In a way he wished his mother would be standing there, proud over the fact that he had found a lovely woman to marry. But imagining that situation quickly brought back reality. If his mother were still living, she would be a bitter old woman by now and probably wouldn’t be smiling, might not even be here if his father were still alive too.
Pushing those thoughts away, Severus smiled a little, feeling shaky with the enormous undertaking he would embark upon today. Sharing his life and all it entailed with another person. It had been a long time since he last had made such a life-changing decision.

With a deep breath Severus stepped up to his friend, offering her his arm, and walked them both over to the Floo. “Sonja and her father will meet us in the Entrance Hall of the Ministry. Thank you again for agreeing to be my witness.” To avoid adding any sappy comments to that, Severus fell silent and allowed his older colleague to precede him through the Floo network.

ooOoo

She spotted him nearly the moment he stepped out of the Floo. He was wearing robes in a deep forest green with delicate embroidery at all seams and hems, resembling different leaves and plants used in Potions. The colour looked wonderful on him, and they matched wonderfully with her gown and robes of different shades of lavender, decorated with tiny embroidered flowers. They had selected leaves and flowers of the same plants in an attempt to express their desire to belong together and complement each other from this day forward until the end of their days.

Next to Sonja, her father – in dark blue silken robes of his own – gave her arm a reassuring pat, before he moved to greet his soon-to-be son-in-law and the elder witch behind Severus, in tartan woollen robes.

“I never would have thought that I might say this. But Professor Snape looks dashing!” her friend whispered in Sonja’s ear. They were close in age, and when it had become clear that Sonja wouldn’t be able to come to Hogwarts, they had fought to stay in contact. It hadn’t always been easy to write letters via Sonja’s father, or find topics they could talk about to each other, but they had persevered.

“I think so too, Loretta. But I guess you’ll have to keep to just looking at him. After today, he’s mine.” They both chuckled. Loretta had gone to Hogwarts shortly before Severus had started teaching there. In fact, Loretta had only escaped being one of his students because she hadn’t been taking Potions at NEWT level. So his first year teaching and her last year at school might have been the same, but they never had interacted in any meaningful way.

They had no time to talk more before the other three came over and a round of introductions followed.

“Shall we move to the family department?” her father asked before he started to walk in the direction of that department, Severus and Professor McGonagall falling in behind him, followed by Loretta and Sonja. On both sides people made room, most of them smiling at the small procession. It was a rather traditional approach to a marriage, so they were getting some of the traditional well-wishes from all sides as they walked through the thinner Saturday morning crowd in the atrium around the rather disturbing fountain in the middle.

It felt as if almost no time at all had passed before they suddenly were standing in front of the office of the official who would lead the ceremony and fill out the forms needed to register their marriage.

After Severus had knocked, it didn’t take long for the official to open the door, bow, and wave them into the office. Sonja looked around the small room and found it quite pleasant. It was
lightened by a window showing sunshine through fluffy white clouds – something she knew to be charmed to look like this – giving the impression of a nice summer day. The furniture was of high quality, and there was nothing standing around that would distract. Sonja had seen quite a few magical homes over the past years, and more than one had at least some items on display that were either tacky in their grandeur or silly in one way or another.

When she had been a little girl, Sonja had dreamed about what her marriage ceremony would be like, going overboard with unicorns being present and things along those lines. But now that she stood here next to the wizard she loved – even after such a short time, they really had worked on getting to know each other – all her childish dreams paled against reality. The trappings of the thing weren’t all that important anyway. What was really important was the man standing at her side, and she couldn’t have dreamed up a better one.

“If the bride and her witness could please move over here.” The official started to arrange them into their places with a few guiding hand movements and friendly pushes. “The groom over here please.” And not a minute later they were all where they should be.

Severus stood turned towards her, a smile in his eyes and even a hint of it around his mouth. Their witnesses stood behind them and slightly to the side, the official to Severus’ right, Sonja’s father on his left.

They reached for each others hands, and clasped them tightly in the space between them.

“Today we have gathered here to witness the promise between Severus and Sonja, to go through life together. To master all hardships, share all joy. To stand by each other through whatever may come.” The official was speaking clearly, his voice smooth with practiced ease, the words flowing without stutters. While the promises were spoken, the man wound a silken ribbon – a white one – around their joined hands and bound it with a complicated-looking knot on top of them.

“Are you willing to keep working on your relationship, hold the promise in your hearts, and provide and take strength for and from each other?”

“I am,” they both spoke at the same time, and the ribbon vanished in a bright flash of light.

A little dazed – maybe the magic was somehow responsible for that? – Sonja followed the instructions on where to sign to complete the paperwork, and then they were outside the office again.

The whole ceremony hadn’t taken longer than a quarter of an hour.

Loretta hugged Sonja, who was clinging to Severus’ hand with all her strength, before she took a step back to beam at her friend. “And now let’s go and eat. Shall we?”

Not paying any mind to the world surrounding them, Sonja walked by Severus’ side – arms hooked around each other – back to the entrance hall and the floos in there. As the father of the bride, her dad had arranged for a table in a restaurant, and therefore he was the first to leave, shortly followed by the rest of their party.

ooOoo

Over the excellent soup – seated around a small table in a corner of the room, shielded by privacy
wards Severus had erected – the five of them held a quiet conversation.

“So have you decided where you want to live?” Sonja’s friend asked of him and his bride.

Sonja shook her head, while Severus smiled, relishing the happy feeling caused by the fact that they were now married. “Not yet.”

Severus placed his spoon in the now empty plate. “Most of the year I need to be at the school. Sonja works here in London. We’re still searching for the best solution.” In fact they hadn’t really spoken about it. When he claimed the title of Lord Prince, he would get access to at least some old houses, that much he knew. He had made tentative plans to make one of those inhabitable for the both of them.

Minerva cleared her throat. “Well, I checked, and the Deputy Headmistress is in charge of organizing the accommodations of all students as well as the staff of Hogwarts. It’s traditional for the spouses of professors to live in the castle, even if they work outside the grounds. And as the building wasn’t built only with a school in mind, but to be a safe haven during times of war, there is space in abundance. Plainly, we have many more rooms than we currently need. I’m quite sure that the rooms of the Head of House of Slytherin are big enough for two, or even a family with children.” The old witch gave Severus and Sonja a brilliant smile. “If you feel comfortable travelling by floo, you could use the public floo in the post office in Hogsmeade to travel between London and the village for work.”

Sonja nodded with a small smile. “That sounds like a good idea, Minerva.” The Head of Gryffindor had insisted that Sonja – as the wife of one of her colleagues – use her first name. “I have no trouble travelling by floo, and the walk to the village and back is a nice one.”

“Then it’s decided. I’ll make all the arrangements needed, so everything will be ready when you two come back Sunday evening. And don’t worry about the others. I’ll make sure they know that you have every right to live together. It won’t stop the normal gossip, but it should curb the worst.”

Severus rolled his eyes at Minerva, who chuckled. They both knew that the gossip among the staff and student population was one of the few things that never seemed to change. If something was a secret, it typically was known by everyone in a matter of hours. And on top of that, blown horribly out of proportion. Maybe Severus should think up a small speech for an announcement for Sunday evening. The stories the students would come up with could only be worse.

But they wouldn’t think about that today. Today was dedicated to celebration, not worrying. There would be enough time for that tomorrow evening.

After the soup, there followed a roast with potatoes and different vegetables. The last course was a trio of different desserts with chocolate and cream. They all enjoyed the food, and the conversation. It was a nice November afternoon in comfortable company.

oooOOooo

When Harry and his friends from Gryffindor stepped into the big hall of the Three Broomsticks, Sirius was sitting at a table near the entrance, waiting for them. The older wizard was obviously nervous and jumped up the moment he spotted the group of teenagers. “Hello! Harry, Ron, Hermione! You have to be Dean Thomas, right?” Taking a few steps towards the dark-skinned
boy, extending his hand in greeting, Sirius seemed even more nervous than before.

A little unsure, Dean took the last step to close the gap and took the offered hand. “Nice to meet you too, sir.”

Harry nervously shifted from one foot to the other, causing the things in his satchel to make noises when they collided with each other. This was a rather uncomfortable situation all around. That the whole village and large parts of the school got to watch wasn’t improving anything.

Blushing, Sirius took a step back. “Please call me Sirius. Snape said Harry would perform the test?” Grey eyes looked questioningly towards Harry, who nodded in confirmation. “And I have a room upstairs reserved for us just for that reason. It’s a rather small room, so I guess it’s best if only Dean, Harry, and I go upstairs. The rest of you, sit down, order something to drink, I’ll pay.”

That met with Ron’s approval, who had been about to say something – probably something less than ideal, judging by the expression quickly draining from his face – but now he just got out of his patched cloak to slump into one of the chairs. With a roll of her eyes Hermione took one of the other chairs, while Neville, who had been mostly silent, sat between the other two. “I think I’ll get a butterbeer, that’ll help me get warm again. It’s really almost winter now, don’t you think?” Ron broke the silence between the Gryffindors now settling in to wait.

While his three friends started to discuss winter-like weather and when the seasons really changed, Harry followed his godfather and Dean up the stairs. The moment he was four steps up, he felt a heavy person follow him and had to roll his eyes, because the two wizards tasked with protecting him on this outing were so determined to follow him everywhere. But if getting tortured for failure was a real possibility, they were probably really motivated to avoid failure.

Or maybe the two working as professional guards just were dedicated to not lose a client on a job. How was he to know their real reasons without asking questions he really didn’t want to know the answers to?

When the three of them went into the room Sirius had reserved, the two guards took posts on each side of the door. Somehow Harry felt like he was some kind of prince, and in a way he was, as the heir to two important families... at least close to what a prince would be in the wizarding world.

Sirius closed the door behind them, and Harry walked over to the stone-topped table near a window to set up the equipment he had carried all the way from Hogwarts.

“Your mother and I met the day before yesterday. We didn’t recognize each other, but that doesn’t mean much. We talked for quite a while and noticed that we were frequenting the same clubs and bars during that time. If you are truly my son,” Sirius blushed a little at that, fidgeting nervously in the chair he had selected, before getting up again to pace in the space in front of the fireplace, “we most likely were more than a little drunk when we met. But this will clear the question right up. You’ll see.”

After that, Sirius’ awkward rambling suddenly stopped, and an equally awkward silence filled the room, only broken by the sounds Harry made during his preparations.

He had placed a tiny cauldron over a small burner, and started a flame to heat the container up to the right temperature before he added the first ingredient.

The flame flickered and illuminated the small parchment Harry unfurled next to the cauldron. There was a base of several essences already mixed in a small phial Harry placed on top of the table right above the other ingredients, before he got out a small cutting board, a pair of scales, a
blade, and a small mortar and pestle.

He would need to have everything prepared so he could add them in quick succession once the cauldron had reached the right temperature.

“I'll need a hair from each of you,” Harry informed Dean and Sirius, who both were avoiding looking at each other. It really was rather uncomfortable to be here with the two of them. If Professor Snape had done this before, he might have come up with an excuse only to not be required to stay in such a situation for any length of time.

Maybe letting Hermione do this would have been better. She never seemed to feel awkward in such situations. Maybe her eagerness for new knowledge helped her to ignore the tension. Busying himself with the preparations, Harry worked on ignoring the rising tension in the room.

As the right temperature was reached, Harry was distracted quite thoroughly by the steps needed to create the potion. It was a quick brew, and took no more than fifteen minutes before a dark, opaque liquid slowly rolled in the tiny cauldron.

“I will first add the hair from Sirius. The potion should become clear with that step. Then I will add the hair from Dean. The potion will change colours again. Depending on what colour it turns you either are father and son, or you’re not.” Finishing that short explanation, Harry let the dark, straight hair from Sirius drop into the cauldron, continuing to stir in even circles.

“And what colour stands for which result?” Dean wanted to know, leaning forward in the direction of the potion, his hands pressed against the table edge.

“It'll turn the colour of blood – a deep red – if you are related that close, but will turn a pale, almost white if you're not.” Harry had dared to ask why the potion turned those particular colours during the preparation in the morning, but had capitulated rather quickly partway into the Potion Master’s explanation. For all the work he had invested into getting better in Potions, Harry held no illusions about his ability to gain a NEWT in the subject. It was highly unlikely that he ever would get above the level of a merely competent brewer. He never would reach the understanding of the subject needed to gain a Mastery.

“Now we'll see.” Three pairs of eyes followed a curly, dark hair on its way into the potion, where the calm, steady stirring motion quickly dragged it under the surface. One, two full circles the colour remained unchanged, but then it started to change from the dark, clear potion it had been to something lighter.

Three more circles later the whole content looked like milk, proving beyond a doubt that Sirius was not Dean’s father.

“Well, that’s not what I had been hoping for.” Sirius drawled with an embarrassed smile. “I hope we'll get to know each other regardless.” Waiting for Harry’s nod, Sirius then vanished the potion, so they could pack everything back into the satchel.

“Would you like to have an old prankster at your side today? I've kept the day free, for the other possible outcome.” He rubbed his hand along his neck, looking sheepish and undecided.

“I for one would like your help in selecting presents for my friends, and those acquaintances I have to give something, Sirius. You surely remember some of those totally illogical rules that I have to follow,” Harry said, while cleaning the tools he had used. Since the summer he had tried to get all those unwritten – and some written – rules into his head, but who could get what for whom still felt like a totally foreign concept.
“I can’t promise to know all those rules, but I’m willing to muddle through this challenge together with you,” Sirius said with a big grin. “Do you have a list?”

Before Sirius opened the door again, he turned to Dean, who looked a little lost. “I’m sorry that the test came to this conclusion. I’ll gladly help you to discover who your father is or was. And if you ever need someone to help you in the wizarding world, I would be happy to be of assistance. You’re a good young man, I’m sure you’ll reach your goals.”

Dean nodded a little stunned, but smiled. “It would have been cool if you had been my father, Sirius. But I guess I’ll just have to continue searching.”

In good spirits, despite the un-wished-for result, the three made their way down to where the others were waiting, followed by Harry’s silent but imposing shadows.

oooOOooo

When the afternoon neared its end, Minerva stood next to Severus and Sonja. “Before you go off for the evening, I think I should transfigure your robes into something that will not stand out so much where you are going. All right?”

“Yes, thank you, Minerva.” With a wave of her wand, Severus’ robes changed into a suit of black wool, over a shirt of green silk. Getting comfortable in his changed clothes, Severus watched as the Transfiguration Professor changed Sonja’s robes into a warm dress. They kept their cloaks the way they had been, bundling up against the cold.

Turning to look at their guests, Severus took his wife’s arm – feeling a happy warmth deep inside his heart – and gave a small bow. “Thank you for being part of our wedding. Have a safe journey back home. We’re happy that you’ve been here and look forward to seeing you again soon.”

They exchanged words of goodbye before going different ways. Severus and Sonja watching before they turned on the spot, Severus taking them both to an alley near the hotel he had reserved a room in. It was in muggle London, one of the best, and he didn’t plan to leave the room at all until they had to return to the castle the next evening.

“If you would follow me, Mrs. Snape,” Severus murmured into her hair, eliciting chuckles from her.

“Lead the way, Mr. Snape,” she answered, a smirk on her face.

Before he started to walk, Severus bent forwards and captured her lips in a kiss. He was so very happy that she had said yes, and was willing to share her life with him, despite the ugly past he had to carry.

No longer delaying, Severus turned around and led the way into the hotel and up to the receptionist. “Hello, I've booked the honeymoon suit, Snape is the name.”

ooOoo
Sonja looked around appreciatively, taking in the exquisite woods, fabrics, and décor. If she hadn’t known that her father was rather rich, and Severus would get control over the fortune of an old family in the near future, she would have felt the room more than a little extravagant.

There even was a bowl of strawberries and a bottle of champagne waiting for them. The berries looked good, but considering the time of year, their quality was questionable. Or did magically produced fruits make it into high-end muggle hotels?

Severus tossed their cloaks over an armchair right next to the entrance before he sauntered past her to open the bottle of champagne, expertly filling the two glasses with the bubbly liquid.

With a smile she accepted the glass and stole a kiss before she kicked off her heels. Her feet were killing her, even with the cushioning charms her friend had put on the shoes, they weren’t made to be comfortable for this long.

“What do you think, my love, a nice hot bath to get warm, before we take a look to see if the bed is as good as the price for the room suggests?”

Sonja had trouble not giggling over Severus’ exaggerated, suggestive tone. It was a good plan, she wasn’t really cold, but a warm bath together with her husband sounded wonderful. She gave him a heated look and a slow smile. “I think this plan of yours is perfect, love. But I will need help to get out of this dress. Do you think you’ll be able to provide the help needed?”

Her dark wizard sipped on his glass, and smirked at her. “I guess I can do that.” He suddenly got a serious expression, and got a small phial out of a pocket with one hand, offering it to her.

“A contraceptive potion, Severus?” she asked him. Until now she hadn’t bothered to take one regularly, and the two of them had used the charm when they had had need of it. They hadn’t really talked about it, but when they had tested Severus’ attempt to create a potion to test a couple for their combined prospect of having magical children, he had told her that Lord Slytherin was determined to shore up the magical population. She had somehow assumed they would try for children from the start.

“We haven’t even found a home for us yet. I thought it should be up to you to decide when…” A little flustered, and blushing, Severus wiggled the phial at her.

So she took it, turned it over in her hand, and sat it down next to the bowl filled with ice cubes and strawberries. Then she looked up to Severus, taking in his calm expression. He left the decision to her, even when she knew that Lord Slytherin still had quite some sway over those who had sworn themselves to him.

She gave him a smile. “I don’t want to wait, Severus. There isn’t really an ideal time for starting a family. But you and I have everything we really need. And there is no guarantee it’ll work out with the first try. So I won't need that, darling.”

Taking their glasses of champagne with them into the bathroom, the two of them started on Severus’ plan for the evening. There were no long conversations that evening. But they came to the agreement that the bed was as good as the price for the room had suggested.

ooooOoooo
Watching his deputy during lunch – quite a few students who had missed breakfast were eating with fervour at their house tables – Albus came to suspect that she was up to something. She was a really good Head of House and Transfiguration professor, but first of all she was a Gryffindor and not used to scheming. It was obvious she was up to something, the question was, what was it she was doing?

Well, there wasn’t a real reason not to ask her. “Minerva, what has you so distracted today? Is there something to be done I have been neglecting? Some parents asking for special lessons? One of the professors asking for new equipment?” She had tried once or twice in the past to handle such requests without involving him, when she thought he was bogged down with other responsibilities. It was a trait useful in a deputy, but her tendency to only inform him after the fact was something he really didn’t like. He might not need to do everything himself, but he liked to be informed about everything going on in his school.

“Nothing like that, Albus. Just organizing some changes in accommodations for one of the professors. It will be done before dinner is served. The elves are eager to help, but have had more than one question so far, so they keep interrupting me to get their answers. No need for you to get involved.” She patted him on his arm, before she took another roll from the basket sitting between their plates.

Albus furrowed his brow. Why would one of the professors need changes to their quarters? And that in such dimensions that the elves had to work more than a few minutes at them? It was rather curious. “Oh, what a curious thing.” He knew he wouldn’t be able to let it rest, and normally Minerva wasn’t inclined to keep something like this from him once he had noticed. “What have you ordered them to do? Is one of ours moving quarters?” He took a sip from his red wine, it went rather well with his roasted chicken breast.

The dark, almost furious look on Minerva’s face took Albus by surprise. But before he could react, she gave him a caustic reply. “Severus needs a few changes finished before he comes back this evening. I agreed to oversee their execution. And frankly, it’s none of your business, Headmaster. These matters fall into my responsibility, and I’m more than capable of seeing them done. If he chooses not to inform you of the specifics, that’s his right.”

Severus? Now Albus was truly surprised. What could his young Potions Professor need changed in his quarters? And why wouldn’t his spy inform him? There weren’t many reasons for the young wizard to keep something from him, ever since the day Severus had come to beg for protection for Lily and her family, he had been open with everything.

But thinking back to everything that had changed in the months since Tom had not only regained his body but also claimed the title of Lord Slytherin, and managed to get back into society, it was entirely possible that Severus wasn’t any longer as tightly bound to him as he had been in the past. There was no doubt Severus was still determined to protect Lily’s son, but as the boy was now the legal son of Tom, this was a rather dangerous shift in the dynamics.

Slowly continuing his meal, Albus was aware that Minerva was silently fuming beside him. It seemed she wasn’t happy with him, but what exactly her problem was remained unclear. But if he knew Minerva at all, she wouldn’t keep silent for long. She had a tendency to speak her mind, even if she was mature enough to not do so in the middle of the Great Hall in front of the whole school.
And true to his expectations – he really knew all his employees rather well – she huffed once they both rose after finishing their meal. With silent amusement, Albus noted that she barely restrained herself from ranting at him.

They were walking up the stairs in the direction of the Headmaster’s office when she prevented him from asking her by letting that rant lose.

“After this evening it will no longer be a secret, so I will warn you now, Albus Dumbledore. If you make life for Severus and his new wife harder than it already will be, just because they didn’t ask for your approval first, I will make sure that you will regret it. Do I make myself clear? There are some of the finest pranksters in my House, and I’m sure some of Severus’ Slytherins would be happy to help as well. Leave him be. Or bear the consequences!” She stormed off and changed into her animagus form before Albus had a chance to react.

Severus was married? If that was true, the whole situation was rather more out of control than he had thought. When Severus had told him that Tom was determined to do something about the current state of their population, Albus had wondered what methods he would use.

Was this part of Tom’s plan? Or had Severus finally let go of his guilt? It seemed rather far-fetched to assume Severus was even capable of forgiving himself for his past errors. Had the man turned against the light? Had he nurtured a viper in their midst? Considering that Severus was a Master Occlumens, there were no easy ways to make sure of his allegiance.

What a mess.

Deep in thought, Albus made his way up to his office, where he walked slowly over to stand by Fawkes to look out over the snow-covered grounds. How could he make sure that his only spy in the enemy's camp was still truly his? It was imperative that he manage to find a way. Maybe Alastor would be able to provide some ideas on how to achieve this. Minerva certainly didn’t seem to be on his side in this.

It had been a nice day in the village yesterday. Today they had stayed indoors, finishing up homework and redoing notes so they wouldn’t have so much to do in preparation for revision before their OWLs next spring.

Now Harry was sitting in his room on the floor, surrounded by all the small things he had bought on his tour with Sirius, and his friends. The groups had changed frequently during the day, as they all tried to not let their friends see what they were getting for them. Now Harry was checking his list of people he had to give a gift to with the things he had bought to get a list of those he still needed to find something for.

He just had finished attaching small scraps of parchment with names to the things he already had, when there was a knock on the door. “One moment!” Harry called out, quickly dumping everything into the two charmed burlap bags he wanted to use to store the things in until he could wrap them closer to the holidays.

When Harry made it over to the door and opened it, Theo was standing there, his chess set in hand, smiling. “Do you have time for a game of chess? Some third-years are making a fuss in the
common room, and Crabbe and Goyle are doing something in the dorm I don’t want to think about. Can I ask for shelter here with you?”

Harry snorted. “Sure, come in, Theo. What exactly are Vincent and Gregory up to?” He wasn’t really sure he wanted to know, but his curiosity had always been a force to be reckoned with.

“It looks like they're sorting out their trunks. Maybe for the first time in ever. I don’t really want to know.” Theo walked in and over to the rug in front of the fireplace, looking at the burlap bag sitting on the chair there. “Have you found something for everyone?”

Harry followed and shook his head sadly. “No. I managed to get most of it, but I have serious trouble with what to get for my godfather or my… father. You know his birthday is during the holidays as well. Do you give something to your father for his birthday?”

Theo nodded, sat down, and started to set out the chess board. “I do, actually. I think it's customary. Most of the time I find something that Father collects and get him one of those. At least I have done so since I was old enough to owl-order on my own. But it’s really not easy. You still have a few weeks, though. White or Black?”

“I have an idea for Sirius. He was a real prankster, so I guess I'll get something from the Weasley twins for him, maybe arrange a contact between them so they can work together on some pranks. I think the three of them would love that. But for… Father… well, it’s rather hard, it’s not like I really know him that well.” Harry sat down opposite his friend, pushing a stack of catalogues under the love seat. “I guess I'll have to search for a bit. I’ll take white, I can use any advantage I can get.”

Laughing at his friend, Theo turned the board so the white chess-men were standing near Harry, and then waited for the green-eyed teenager to make the first move. “That's true, but you are getting better.”

They spend a nice afternoon playing a few games of chess. Theo won two out of three games, to Harry’s secret glee. Against Ron he never managed to win. To win even one game was so much better.

ooooOOoooo

It was a rather odd request that brought Malcolm Greengrass to Griffin House today. His Lord had asked him to gather and deliver some rather special literature. When the Dark Lord asked for this, Malcolm had been rather shocked. Something like that wasn’t even talked about in polite society, that he would ask for his Healer to procure and deliver such was unusual at the least.

So now here he was, different shrunken books and magazines of what amounted to pornography in his pockets, still guessing why his Lord wanted them and hadn’t bought them himself.

Malcolm smirked because he certainly had had a fun afternoon, searching through the family's rather extensive collection of moving photographs, animated artwork, and texts on this topic, to find a broad selection just as his Lord had instructed. But while the search had been fun, the thoughts now circling around his mind were rather less so. Because he certainly hadn’t wanted to think about his Lord in such a context. That he had been asked to provide not only material showcasing different witches, but also wizards, and to provide material geared to different interests
and preferences, had sparked the question if maybe the Dark Lord had never found a sexual preference.

The thought of being caught thinking over the possible scenario of the Dark Lord's still being a virgin wasn’t one Malcolm liked entertaining.

When he reached the door – bundled up in his best travelling cloak over warm woollen robes – an elf opened the door, waving him into the entrance hall. “Flimm will be informing Master Marvolo about you being here, Healer. Please wait.” And before he could react in any way, the elf had popped out of the room, most likely to wherever the Dark Lord currently was.

Before Malcolm had managed to banish his speculations from his mind, the Dark Lord walked into the hall, coming from deeper in the building. Without a seconds hesitation, Malcolm went to one knee, bowing his head in proper greeting.

“Malcolm, you have what I asked for?” The question was asked in such a normal tone of voice that the younger wizard could forget for a moment what it was he had stashed in his pockets.

“I have, my Lord. I hope what I have found will meet with your approval.” But the scandalous nature of those books was not forgotten for long, causing him to blush, to his mortification. The chuckle coming from the Dark Lord at the same moment only served to deepen his embarrassment.

“Follow me.” Without further instruction the Dark Lord turned to walk down the corridor to the study Malcolm had seen the other times he had been in this house. Aware that the powerful wizard wouldn’t wait for him, Malcolm hurriedly got up from his knee and walked quickly so as not to fall behind any farther.

Once inside the study, the Dark Lord waved his hand at the table between them as if to demand that Malcolm present his findings. So that was what the Healer did, getting out the stacks of parchment, bound books, and framed sensual images, to enlarge them so they were once again easy to see.

With reluctant curiosity Malcolm watched as the Dark Lord started to sort through the items with an expression of almost horrified fascination almost hidden behind a mask of indifference. Only another little fact sparking Malcolm’s imagination. He really would have preferred to be able to pretend that his Lord didn’t have a sex-life, and wasn’t interested in one at all. But as he was the man’s Healer, he probably wouldn’t be able to do that. It was a little ridiculous that he was so embarrassed by this topic.

“I assume that there is a way to ascertain if a person has a body capable of all normal reactions pertaining to procreation?” the Dark Lord asked delicately, carefully selecting his words to formulate his request.

Malcolm now was sure that his Lord had no real experience with sex. Hopefully the man had at least an academic understanding. Having the Talk with his Lord as the one explaining would be mortifying. “There are several diagnostic spells to make certain that these bodily functions are healthy.” He took a deep breath, he was a Healer, the Dark Lord’s personal Healer, he had tortured in the past. There was no reason he should blush like a young schoolgirl or a prudish old maid over this topic. “Have you experienced problems in this area, my Lord?”

With a contemplative look the Dark Lord made a vague gesture. “I’m unsure. When I was a teenager I noticed certain reactions. But they never were connected with circumstances typically associated with them. Since I regained a body, there haven’t been any reactions at all.” Suddenly deep red, blazing eyes were focused on him. With a suddenly dry mouth Malcolm had trouble
swallowing.

“These,” the Dark Lord waved his hand once over the materials laid out on the table, “will help me in the exploration of this matter. But as this body might still be faulty, I guess it would be wise to ascertain there are no… health problems involved.”

Hiding behind his professional education in everything regarding the body, Malcolm got out his wand and silently asked for permission to cast the diagnostics needed, which was given with a small nod.

About twenty minutes later a relieved Malcolm was on his way home. The diagnostics had proven that the Dark Lord was perfectly healthy in that regard. But he had to ask the man to endeavour to eat a more diverse diet, adding more vegetables and whole grains, to make sure it stayed that way. With a lighter heart and a mind full of disturbing ideas, Malcolm headed to the nearest point he could apparate from. Maybe he could search for some company tonight. There still was this order to find a partner, maybe he should spend more of his time trying to follow it. With his mind made up, the young Healer decided he would search in earnest this winter season.

Chapter End Notes

I have the feeling that a few of you will be happy with the outcome of the paternity test, and some will be not. To see if Sirius has a child or children already we will have to wait some more time. Finding an expert isn't easy ;)
I hope my take on a marriage ceremony is plausible, it's the first time I have written something like this, and it's unlike some of the wizarding ceremonies I have read in different stories.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Next chapter planned for 25th of August 2017

last edited 12th of August 2017
Finding a way

Chapter Notes

AN: I have been doing a little plot outlining, there is a lot to cover during the month of December :D I'm looking forward to it! And I hope you all are too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday, 19th of November

Snow covered the ground around them when Sonja – held securely in Severus’ arms – appeared just outside the wards in front of the gates to Hogwarts. She was smiling contentedly, snuggling a little deeper in her husband’s embrace before she reluctantly left the warmth behind.

They both turned to face the castle, Severus capturing her hand in his, squeezing it through the thick layers of knitted mittens. “Welcome home, Mrs. Snape.” he murmured, startling a little laugh out of Sonja.

“Let’s get inside. It is fairly cold this far up north.” Sonja stamped her feet – in warm boots and not the delicate silk shoes normally going with the robes she was wearing – to get them to warm up, spurring Severus into leading her up the gravel road to the castle.

Dinner had already been over before they had departed from their hotel, so now as they ambled the halls down to the dungeons, there weren’t any students wandering around. As tomorrow was Monday and classes would resume, and considering the chilling temperature in the halls, Sonja wasn’t surprised they didn’t encounter anyone until they reached a bit of wall that looked remarkably like all the others they had already passed on their way down here.

“Are you ready to face the bunch of kids, teenagers, and young adults I’m responsible for most of the year?” Severus asked, a sardonic smirk on his face.

Sonja grinned back. “Probably not. But let’s do it anyway.”

Before Severus opened the door he got his wand out and cast something – probably a charm – at her that made her clothes appear as if she had just dressed. Maybe something that mimicked the effect of a good ironing? Then he turned the wand on himself, making sure they both were presentable.

Giving her a reassuring smile, Severus turned to the wall and clearly stated “Dittany,” causing a section of the wall to open, revealing a room filled with young witches and wizards who were chattering and causing an amount of noise Sonja hadn’t really expected. It sounded more like the crowed on a busy Saturday in Diagon Alley, than a group of students about to go to bed.

The moment Severus took a step into the room, though, one of the students near to the entrance spotted him, and silence spread out through the room, all faces turning to face them. Taking a deep breath, and swallowing, Sonja stepped through the door as well. She looked upon all those young people able to wield magic and therefore carrying around a deadly weapon everywhere. It wasn’t
often that Sonja was reminded quite so forcefully of the fact that everyone with magic was able to harm her easily.

But exactly that was the reason she needed to be here. She loved Severus. Hiding out in London or even leaving the magical world would send the wrong message. It would imply she didn’t belong, that it was best to exclude her. Humans were able to harm each other just fine without magic. The only safeguard was educating the youngsters to be good people. If they managed that, it was of no importance if someone had magic or not, because they wouldn’t be inclined to do other humans harm.

Her back straight, Sonja stepped up to her husband’s side, linked her arm with his, and looked smiling over the group of students.

ooOoo

Harry had watched the girls play a game of gobstones – he really wanted to learn the rules and tactics before he played with the others who were so much better at the game – when the door to the common room opened and their Head of House walked in. He looked as severe as ever, but his robes and cloak were somewhat different.

Before Harry could make out what exactly was different about them, as the light wasn’t good where the Professor stood, and there were several others as well as some pieces of furniture between them, the dark-haired wizard began to speak.

“Before the rumour mill butchers the story into something barely resembling the truth, and because I feel that you, as my students, should learn of this from me,” in a surprisingly gentle gesture – at least to Harry’s eyes – the professor guided the woman standing slightly behind him, to his side, placing his arm around her middle, “I want to introduce you to my wife, Sonja Snape. She’ll be living here at the castle, but will continue to work in London. I expect you all to show her proper respect.” The am I clear wasn’t said out loud, but the look Snape gave them all was doing a fine job of conveying the message anyway.

The moment Harry realised that the Professor had to have married over the weekend, his mind kicked into high gear. The lessons over the summer had been quite focused on the concept of the need for proper behaviour befitting his status, and proper responses in a plethora of social situations. Weddings had been one of the more complex situations, but thankfully meeting a newly wedded couple was the easiest situation amidst of the tangle of whens and ifs he was expected to remember and navigate with ease.

Seeing as all the others were sitting in their seats almost as if frozen, Harry stood and made his way over to the happy pair, a little dismayed at the look of uncertainty slowly creeping into the woman’s eyes. When he stood before his Head of House and his wife, Harry bowed, a little nervous he might botch it, and recited the words drilled into him. “I wish you both a happy marriage in magic. May you prosper together.” He came back up to see a blinding smile on Mrs. Snape’s face and something that might count as approval in Professor Snape’s eyes.

With the tension now broken, each of the other Slytherins came forward to present their well-wishes, giving Harry the opportunity to retreat to a quiet corner from where he watched and got lost in his own thoughts.
Of course Marvolo’s attempts to increase the magical population by forcing his followers to marry and procreate had come up more than once in their conversations. With the Notts adopting a boy, Draco’s parents expecting a second child, the development of a potion to enable two men to have a biological child together – with the help of a surrogate mother – it was obvious that this was more of the same.

But it looked like there was love between the two, obligation not the only reason for the marriage. And looking back, it hadn't come all that unexpectedly. There had been rumours of Professor Snape’s having a female guest, meeting up with a woman in the village, a woman who was not a teacher had been sitting with him at the table.

Considering there never was any gossip of such things about any of the teachers at the school, Harry mused that their lives had to be quite dull. There was always talk about who was dating whom, at least among the older students, who had been seen going to Madame Puddifoot’s Tea Shop and so on and so on. But never about any of the Professors. Maybe they just were too old to have a private life of that kind, or were simply too good in hiding their private life from the students.

Harry hoped that he had selected the right words. There were several phrases one could use to congratulate a couple on their marriage. There were several wishing good fortune, with differing emphasis from the financial over simple happiness together, to many children, and, to Harry’s bafflement, even some that sounded friendly enough but wished ill on the future of the newlyweds.

If he had remembered right, the one he had used wished the newly married couple financial stability, children, and happiness together. It would be a safe bet, not putting too much emphasis on one of them over the other. Judging by the fact that both had looked pleased – as pleased as Professor Snape ever got – he hadn’t made a terrible blunder.

While he had been pondering the awkward traditions surrounding marriages, all students had finished congratulating their Head of House and his wife, slowly sitting back down, while Mrs. Snape took her husband by his hand and left the common room through the door to the Professor’s quarters.

Quickly steering his thoughts away from pondering what they might do the rest of the evening, Harry turned to the other fifth-years, who had gathered around him, as they had started to do more often in the last week, giving them a questioning look.

Blaise was the first to speak up, just loud enough to be heard over the low murmur in the room. “Well, that’s something new. I never would have thought there was a woman who could tame our sour professor.”

Daphne slapped the dark-skinned boy over the head, getting chuckles out of those sitting around them, and an indignant “Hey!” from Blaise himself. “Don’t be a prick, Zabini. Just because he is a private and reserved wizard, you shouldn’t mock him.”

From there the conversation quickly moved on to the topic of the upcoming holidays, leaving the boys to make their excuses once the girls started to discuss how they would like their robes to match this year’s theme of the Malfoy ball.

When they walked down the corridor to the fifth-year dorm where they would split up – Harry continuing to his own room – Draco shook his head, sighing. “Since I started at Hogwarts, I always expect mother to need to reuse one of the themes from years past. But she always finds a new one, more ridiculous than any before.”
Theo just shrugged. “I think she tries to come up with something that would stymie the tailors. Or do any of you come up with a design yourself?”

That got the others all laughing, and they parted with happy banter, Harry walking on to reach his room. In a way he missed rooming with others. It had been such an important part of life at Hogwarts, so different from what he had been used to. But he supposed it was easier living in his own room now that he was Heir Slytherin as well as The-Boy-Who-Lived, a place to be on his own, to retreat to when the others were getting too intrusive, and a place he could call both Marvolo and Sirius every evening without others listening in on his conversations.

After getting out of his robes and shoes, Harry collected both mirrors and settled comfortably on his bed, finding a warming charm had been applied, making the covers a comfortable place to sit.

Deciding he would call Marvolo first, as Sirius never made such a fuss over his being up late, Harry took the correct mirror into his hand. Beside the fact that Professor Snape had married, there wasn’t much to tell, but he liked the ritual of the daily calls anyway. And maybe Marvolo had something to tell, or Sirius had found an expert to help with the tapestry. So Harry spend a nice hour talking before he went to get ready for bed. Tomorrow another day of classes waited for him.

ooOoo

Monday, 20th of November

Hermione was going over the essays she needed to hand in this week in her head as they made their way into the Great Hall for breakfast. They were late, because Ron had needed to run back three times into his dorm to get something he had forgotten. Sometimes she wondered why – or how – he always managed to misplace his things. She was sure if his head wasn’t attached to his body, he would forget it somewhere around the castle as well.

Like most mornings, the Slytherins, and with them Harry, already were seated at their table, eating with manners she wished more of her own housemates had. Well, with the exception of Crabbe and Goyle, who behaved much the same as Ron. Thankfully the other boys seemed to mature, starting to eat with their mouths closed, and no longer showing each other things that were gross.

Quickly Hermione selected a sufficiently big space on the benches near to where Neville was sitting, sat down herself, and set her bag down at her feet. “Good morning, Neville. Please pass the fruit.” She selected a pear and then handed the dish further down the table, where Lavender asked for it.

Most of the student body had arrived for breakfast when the Headmaster rose from his seat in the middle of the head table and got everyone's attention with a loud sound caused by his wand.

“Good morning, everybody,” the old man said with a cheerful voice, opening his arms as if he was trying to hug them all. “Please grant me a moment of your attention. This last weekend our most beloved Potions Master, Severus Snape, has entered the bond of matrimony with the lovely woman now sitting at his side. Please welcome Sonja Snape, née Jiggers, here at Hogwarts.” He brought his hands together for a few oddly spaced claps, managing to pull a few of the students with him. Hermione noticed that all Slytherins were clapping with polite enthusiasm, but most of the others
only sat there staring, their breakfast all but forgotten. “I’m sure you all will help her if she needs help getting around our lovely school. Now let me no longer keep you from your meal.”

While Hermione watched the Headmaster sit down and turn to Professor McGonagall to talk, to she wondered why the man seemed to ignore the Potions Professor and the woman sitting by his side. Shouldn’t he have said some words of congratulation? Something more than his wish for the students to welcome her? It was rather odd.

“Do you reckon he has her under a potion? Or maybe even the Imperius?” Ron asked before taking a big bite from a sausage, scowling up at the newlyweds speaking animatedly with Professors Vector and Flitwick.

“Ron!” Shocked by that casual accusation of using one of the Unforgivable curses, Hermione turned to fully face Ron, feeling her cheeks flush in anger. Would he ever develop a filter between his brain and his mouth? “How can you just claim such a thing!? That’s a serious accusation, and a lie! I know Professor Snape isn’t your favourite teacher, but that’s no reason to claim he's committed crimes worthy of a lifetime sentence in Azkaban!” Huffing in frustration over her friend’s insistence on disliking their Potions Professor to the point of open warfare, Hermione snatched a piece of toast from a nearby basket. She would try to ignore her immature classmates in favour of getting a nice and healthy breakfast.

But it did prove hard not to constantly refute the rude and unkind speculation the others engaged in. “Maybe she likes being insulted?” Dean asked with a snicker, earning himself laughter from quite a few boys, and disapproving glares from the more romantically inclined of the girls. So the more outlandish claims following were interrupted by Lavender, who sniffed and somehow managed to look down at the Gryffindor boys. “You simpletons, isn’t it obvious that she managed to crack the hard shell Professor Snape had erected around his heart, and brought out the sensible soul hiding from the evils of the world?”

Rolling her eyes in the privacy of her own mind, Hermione quickly finished her breakfast. When the others insisted on being immature brats, she didn’t want to stick around. That was how she ended up walking alongside some Slytherins towards the door out of the Great Hall.

“Good morning, Hermione,” Harry’s cheerful voice greeted her from the side, and with a smile she turned to look at Harry, her hair swinging behind her.

“Good morning, Harry. You all didn’t look too surprised by the news.” Her statement sounded more like a question, and she was curious if this was merely the result of all that famous training to keep your composure in public, or if they really had already known.

“He informed us yesterday evening,” Theo answered casually with an easy smile.

“See you later in Potions?” Harry asked which she answered with a smile and a nod. “Then try to keep Ron from dozing during History.” With a wink Harry turned with the others, Draco Malfoy and Crabbe and Goyle, the two boys who always seemed to be glued to his side, as well as Theodore, towards the stair down into the dungeons. Not one of them had their books with them, probably because they had a free period first.

Soon Hermione was immersed in revision of the chapter she had read in preparation for this day’s lesson. It was sad that the professor for this undoubtedly fascinating subject was such a terrible teacher. Considering that she had troubles staying awake in the class, it was hardly a wonder that several of her classmates opted to either nap or do self-study during that stretch of time.
To avoid the masses of students leaving, Severus and Sonja left the Great Hall through the teacher’s entrance right in the back near the head table. The Professors were prone to use this entrance whenever they weren’t in the mood to walk by the house tables and risk being accosted by their students with questions. For this reason, the entrance saw the most traffic in the morning and evening.

The two of them had almost reached the end of the small corridor and the door there leading into the entrance hall, when the Headmaster called from the door into the Great Hall. “Severus, my boy, please, if I could have a moment of your time?”

Knowing quite well that this wasn’t a polite request but a thinly veiled order, Severus helped Sonja put on her cloak, spelling it with a warming charm. She playfully rolled her eyes at him, and gave him a short but intensive kiss. “See you tonight, Severus. Have a nice day.”

Now it was on him to roll his eyes and give a mock scowl. He having a nice day teaching dunderheads the delicate art of brewing? Not very likely. “Have a nice day too, my love.” He watched her walk out of the corridor, then turned to face the Headmaster, glimpsing the shuffling of several small painted figures in a landscape picture hanging on the wall.

For long moments the two wizards stood there, Severus in the heavy, dark robes he always selected for days he would be teaching, as they were sturdy enough to withstand the demands placed on everything that came into contact with students, and the Headmaster in some truly eye-watering bright blue robes with delicate embroidery of what looked like constellations. Severus had decided to wait for the old man to make the first move. If he said anything now, he might manage to give something away that the Headmaster didn’t know just yet. It had always worked rather well in the past on different people who tended to think highly of themselves.

“I’m saddened that you didn’t confide in me, my boy. Marrying in times like this is quite a risky step to take, don’t you think? If you had only trusted me more, I might have been able to give you some invaluable advice. By placing her by your side now, you have brought incredible danger upon her.” If there was something that Severus respected the old Headmaster for, it was his ability to keep the mask of grandfatherly friend and mentor firmly in place, while threatening quite clearly with unpleasantness if not everything was to go his way. Determined not to let himself be manoeuvred into letting his anger get the better of him, Severus took several calm breaths, contemplating his response, before he spoke. “We saw no reason to inform anyone of our decision to marry so soon after our engagement. We are both adults, and do not have much family. Sonja didn’t want any publicity, and I wholeheartedly agreed. If it had been known beforehand that a reformed, former Death Eater was to marry a Squib from a well-known family, what do you think would have happened? We both know the situation our world is in, and exactly that state is the reason we didn’t want to wait.”

Just for a fraction of a second, Severus saw clear as day the frustration and confusion on the Headmaster’s face. It was obvious that the old man hadn’t anticipated that Severus would stay this calm, or would be obviously aware of the dangers they both were in. Certainly the dangers the Headmaster imagined were more dire than the reality, but nevertheless both Sonja and Severus had talked about his current predicament as a follower of the Dark Lord – now better known as Lord Slytherin – and a spy for the self-proclaimed Leader of the Light, Albus Dumbledore.

The twinkle returned to the blue eyes, and a small frown settled onto the face of the Headmaster, creating a rather curious contradiction. “Your new wife is a Squib, my boy. Won’t that provoke
problems with your associates, and Tom in particular?” It was startling how quickly the man’s proclaiming and demanding equality for all in the wizarding community would so easily point out the stereotypes prevalent in their society.

“It will not. I remember quite clearly that I told you the Dark Lord’s plans had changed. Due to the distinct possibility that magics born into non-magical families are caused by old Squib-lines resurfacing after several generations, he has decided to keep them in our own society, therefore reducing the seeds for new such lines in the muggle world. Me marrying a Squib, will keep her and any eventual children firmly away from Muggle society. He made it clear that he wouldn’t tolerate any actions liable to harm those goals. And he already knew of our engagement. Marrying now doesn’t change that.” It seemed the old man was bent on believing the worst of the Dark Lord, regardless of what intelligence Severus brought back.

Folding his arms over his chest, Dumbledore shifted his weight to one foot, assuming somewhat of a contemplative pose. “Are you sure off that? It is quite a gamble to marry only with the assurances of safety made by Tom, who, as we both know, is prone to sudden mood changes and manic behaviour.”

There was a heavy undertone of I’m older and know better than you to the Headmaster’s words. It was getting harder and harder to keep an incredulous snort to himself. Folding his own hands behind his back, his wand easy to reach from this position, Severus gave the Headmaster a sceptical look. “Since the Dark Lord has regained a body, his mood has stabilized quite considerably. He does still torture – I fear that Igor is still being held somewhere – but never without due cause, or without prior warning. I fear you need to accept that our knowledge of how he is likely to react to any given situation, based on his behaviour shortly before his fall, isn’t going to be accurate anymore. He has changed. How else is he able to pass as a Lord of the Wizengamot without slips?”

It looked like the Headmaster was sucking on a lemon drop and had found it to be made without sugar, but Severus wouldn’t let the man speak now. It was time someone tried to make him see sense. If none of them managed, he would be prone to take some desperate and dangerous actions in the near future. So Severus kept talking. “I’m dedicated to keeping Lily’s son safe, just as I have sworn to you. I’ll do what is within my abilities to work on preventing a new war, to help to prevent further loss of life. I’m in the best position to keep gathering information on the Dark Lord’s actions and bringing it to you. But at the moment, it looks to me as if you are unable to accept that reality doesn’t match your expectations of what would happen once he would be back.” Severus made a small pause for effect. “If you keep being wilfully blind, I fear you might overlook something truly important because you are chasing after shadows, causing us to lose sight of our goals.” Without giving the man time to gather his wits and regain his balance, Severus gave him a curt nod. “I have to prepare for the fifth-year Slytherin-Gryffindor class. If you will excuse me.” He turned on his heel, his robes billowing impressively, and left the small corridor towards the entrance hall. He had spent enough time already trying to talk sense into a delusional fool. Maybe he should hint to Madame Pomfrey that the old man needed a check-up.

ooOoo

This talk had troubled Albus greatly. It truly seemed as if Severus had moved on from Lily, had found the ability to fall for a different woman. To find love. It had seemed so utterly impossible the night that troubled young man had met with him in the open, in bad weather, sinking to his knees
and begging for help.

Maybe it would have been better if he had had let Severus swear an oath on Albus himself when
the young man had sat sobbing in his office. Now with Harry in Tom’s hands, there was the
possibility that the boy, and therefore Severus, would be swayed to follow Tom down the dark
path. But no, it was impossible that they would be able to forgive the murder of Lily.

Albus had stood there, thinking, for a longer time than he had realized when a small voice from
one of the few portraits in this corridor caught his attention. “I’m sorry, sir. But you probably don’t
want to be seen just standing here when the others leave after they have finished breakfast.”

Albus gave the young witch in a portrait of a small Sunday picnic a friendly smile, and started to
make his way up to his office. He would have to think about what Severus had said. Was it
possible that Tom had found his way back to an earlier state of mind? Or was Severus no longer
reliable?

He almost had reached the door when a portly wizard painted in front of a bookcase and another
painting of himself spoke up. “It is a sad fact of history that many an error could have been
prevented if the people in power had only looked at the world and had seen what was there, not
what they thought was true, but what was actually there.”

Without answering this or acknowledging the man, Albus walked out of the corridor. If there was
someone in this world aware of the dangers of power, it would be he. How could a painted likeness
of some wizard long forgotten to history think his advice was valuable or even wanted?

oooOOooo

Saturday, 25th of November

Pacing up and down in his reception room, Sirius waited none too patiently for his guest to arrive.
It had proven to be rather difficult to find an expert on charms who was willing to come to the old
infamous Black Townhouse and examine an old artefact that showed signs of failing.

Many hadn’t even deigned to reply to his polite letters of inquiry for help. And that when he had
asked Remus to help him write them. Others had send short, rude notes. And he really had sent a
letter to everyone he could find, even going so far as to sent letters to Japan and China, as well as
both North and South America.

But luckily his old Charms Professor, a Master in the subject, had agreed to come over and take a
look. The professor had said more than once that he was unable to make any promises. But Sirius
hoped that the small wizard might be able to give him some more information about what was
wrong, enabling him to write better letters to those few experts and Masters who had sent polite
denies because of the vague nature of the inquiry.

Finally the fire flared green and a short figure emerged from the Floo, looking around while
smiling in a friendly manner.

“Professor Flitwick! Welcome to Grimmauld Place! Come in!” Sirius felt instantly better the
moment the kind eyes of the part-goblin professor fell on him.
“Certainly, Lord Black.” Sirius gave him an exasperated sigh and rolled his eyes, he still had trouble accepting that he truly was Lord Black now. “I’m happy to help as much as I can. But mostly I’m glad for this opportunity. There aren’t many tapestries like the one you described, and most families guard them fiercely.”

Sirius nodded, that was certainly true. He himself wasn’t aware of any other British wizarding families that had something similar, but it was quite possible that they simply held them close, telling no one of them. “Then let’s not waste any time. Follow me!”

And so they walked up the stairs to the room the monstrosity hung in. But as he hoped the thing would reveal whether he had any children he should be taking care of, Sirius supposed he had to change his attitude a bit.

Opening the door with a flourish and an exaggerated bow, he let the small Hogwarts professor walk in first. He was almost sure that the professor had been chuckling at his antics. “Over there, Professor,” he said, following the man in.

“Oh, please. You are no longer a student, and I’m no longer your professor. My name is Filius.” A hand was extended towards him.

With a big smile of his own, Sirius bent down a little – Filius was really a fair amount shorter than him – and shook the other’s hand. “I’m Sirius, and not joking either.” He winked, and then sat down to watch the Professor work.

And it was a good thing he had taken a seat, because it took several hours of intense muttering, casting of spells, and more muttering, before the wizard working on the tapestry turned around to face Sirius. “First, I don’t think that I personally can help here. Maybe we can sit down somewhere while I explain?”

It was a sensible request, so Sirius nodded, his dark hair falling forward in the motion, before he led the way over to a small seating area. “So what have you found, Filius?”

“The moment I saw the tapestry I thought it was possible that all the small burns are the cause of the failing charms. By the way, these are a true work of art!” His eyes were shining with awe over the intricate magic he had examined today. “The way all those family tracing charms, preservation charms, charms to make small likenesses of people… it is magnificent! Sadly, I have only cursory knowledge about all those charms tracking the progeny of those already recorded in the tapestry. It somehow works on the concept on recording the names and dates belonging to those descending from those already recorded, I think, by somehow utilizing wards keyed to family members. As I said, I’m by no means an expert. But I’m sure that the burned places distort the weaving, stopping the tapestry from working properly. I can give you a detailed writeup of my findings and the name of an expert in those kinds of family-related charms and wards. If you are interested, Sirius?”

With a small smile – there still was hope he would not have to search high and low for every woman he had ever had sex with to check if he might have faltered in his contraceptive charm – Sirius accepted. “That would be really helpful, Filius.”

He offered tea and some pastries as a refreshment before Flitwick made his way back to the castle, but the Charms Professor declined. “I have a study group with some of my Ravens this evening. I better make sure to be back in time. I will send the information you need by owl.”

After the flames in the Floo had returned to their natural red, Sirius contemplated what to do with a young Saturday evening. Maybe Remus’ suggestion he should go out into the city, visiting the clubs and bars, wasn’t so bad after all. Deciding that this was exactly what he would do, Sirius
walked up to his room to stand in front of his wardrobe for the next hour, searching for just the right outfit to wear on his first trip through the bars in what felt like much too long.

Monday, 27th of November

In between the many missives of his morning mail, Xerxes found one from Hermione, which he placed to the side to read in leisure later – her letters always were long and full of details he didn’t want to miss – and one official-looking envelope that had a seal identifying it as one from Gringotts. Eager to see if it was about the thing he hoped it was about, Xerxes tore it open with his hands, not patient enough to get his wand out to do it the proper way.

Quickly his eyes flew over the stilted, formal writing, skipping the politely worded introductory sentences to get to the heart of the matter. And indeed it was the confirmation that the vault his once daughter-in-law Bellatrix had owned was now his.

After his Lord had made clear that he needed to retrieve something of his that he had entrusted into Bellatrix’ care, to place into her vault in the depths depth under the bank, Xerxes had filed a complaint against the Ancient and Noble House of Black because the marriage contract between his son and Bellatrix had been broken.

Back when the two of them had decided they wanted to marry, they had written the requirement of at least two children into the contract. Xerxes remembered that Bellatrix had been reluctant, and had wished the number to be limited to one child. When Rodolphus had explained to her that he could demand at least one son, leading potentially to many, many daughters, she quickly changed her tune. Two children was much better than the potential need to have a dozen daughters and still be trying for a son.

He wasn’t sure why there never had been a child. If it was because they simply hadn’t been able to have them, never tried, or whatever. He wasn’t about to ask his son, either. But it had been a reason to demand the agreed-upon compensation from House Black. He and the new Lord Black had exchanged quite a few letters over the matter.

At first Sirius Black had been furious over the demand, but finally he had relented. Xerxes thought it was possible the man had realized that he had no interest in being in the possession of anything that had belonged to his least favourite cousin. He even had disowned her from the family once he had been recognized as the Lord.

Probably Xerxes’ willingness to return some invaluable Black heirlooms to Lord Black, and therefore the family they belonged to, had been the argument that had swayed the man’s opinion.

And here now he had the notice that the vault of Bellatrix Lestrange had been seized for the Black family, and was now given to Lord Lestrange as compensation for a broken marriage contract. The key was encased in the envelope and Xerxes immediately decided to go there after he had finished his breakfast of eggs – sunny side up – lightly toasted bread with orange marmalade, and a nice cup of tea.

It didn’t take him long before he was dressed in fine but everyday robes, and a warm fur-lined
cloak. A short Floo trip later he had reached the bank, and then stood waiting in line to get to a
teller. In a way it was funny how, if you didn’t have an appointment, which everyone could get,
everyone had to wait in line. Every Lord was the same as the parents of a muggle-born child in this
hall. That was probably the reason his own father had once insisted that Xerxes was always to get
an appointment when he had to deal with the bank in person.

But this was too important to wait two days or more to get a free spot for an appointment. His Lord
had repeatedly asked after the cup he wanted to get back, had even described it in detail, so Xerxes
could get it out without having to contact him first. Sometimes his Lord was more like the friend
Xerxes had had back when they had been in school together, and on some days he was more the
Dark Lord commanding his troops. But in this Xerxes was pretty sure that both personas had the
same goals and reasons to act.

So as a good friend, and a devoted follower, Xerxes acted the moment he had the opportunity.

Soon it was his turn to follow one of the goblins to the carts and take the nausea-inducing trip with
one of the horrible things down into the bowels beneath London. The door to the vault was opened
after the pitiful creature that once had been a magnificent dragon had retreated before the sound it
associated with horrible pain.

Behind the door were stacks of coins, books, and other artefacts. With searching eyes he walked
through the assorted riches, ignoring most of it in favour of concentrating on a two-handled golden
cup that largely resembled a chalice.

It didn’t take all that long to find it, and with the goblin's permission he cast the counter curse
against the gemino effect that guarded the contents of the vault against being removed by someone
uninformed of the spell's presence. The things inside would duplicate on contact with skin until the
contact was broken. In addition to burying intruders under gold, the pieces turned hot too, burning
the unsuspecting thief. Xerxes felt that it was an excessive security measure, so he didn’t put up the
charm again after he had taken the cup from it's place high up on a shelf. Before he placed the cup
into a silken bag he had brought, Xerxes shortly examined the example of fine craftsmanship.
There was the image of a badger carved into one side. This was without doubt the cup his Lord had
ordered Xerxes to retrieve.

With the cup inside the silk bag hidden inside his robes, Xerxes left the vault with the intention to
come back sometime later this month or even next year to search for those items Lord Black had
named as those he suspected Bellatrix had taken with her or had been gifted later. He didn’t feel
that it was all that urgent.

Moving quickly, Xerxes got back into the cart – he was sure the goblins had designed them to be
the worst experience ever on purpose – and from there into the Alley. He would buy a book for
Hermione, maybe a collection of poetry to broaden her horizons, before he would head home so his
unavoidable visit to Marvolo wouldn’t be observed or connected to his visit to the bank.

Whistling a tune, he walked down the street, forcing everyone to make room for him with his
confidence.

ooOoo

Marvolo was sitting in his office at Headquarters, jotting notes down on a ritual he was developing.
As he had had not one ounce of success with trying to absorb one of the horcruxes he had managed to get back into his possession, he had decided to move his efforts to a way to move a horcrux from one object into another. After all, he had to find a way to get the horcrux out of Henry without harming his son.

Even if he managed to truly regret the murder that had created his latest horcrux – and he felt his murder of Lily Potter was the one he was most likely to feel true regret for – it was far from certain that the re-absorption wouldn’t cause harm to Henry.

He tossed the quill away in the direction of the merrily burning fire heating the room, when the wards around the house informed him that one of his Death Eaters had apparated into the building.

Quickly notes vanished into a warded drawer, ink droplets were vanished, and boring paperwork replaced his previous work, because it would have been curious to find him here not working on anything.

It didn’t take long until there was a knock on the door, announcing his visitor.

“Come in!” he called, placing the quill to balance on top of his inkwell. Looking up in time to see the door open to admit Xerxes clothed in his normal attire, holding a silken bag in one hand. In a second Marvolo was out of his chair and stood next to his friend, who looked like he had not expected such a reaction.

And quite frankly, Marvolo was rather surprised himself, but didn’t want to ponder to long on this. “You have found the cup?” his question was urgent, his voice almost inaudible but intense.

“After I got the message from Gringotts that the vault had been seized for House Black and in turn granted as compensation for a broken marriage contract to House Lestrange, I went to the bank immediately. It was easy to find. I guess Bellatrix wanted to be able to see the proof of your trust in her every time she visited the vault.” Without further words Xerxes offered the bag, and Marvolo reverently took it from the man, taking it over to the desk to set it down. After a moment fiddling with the drawstring, Marvolo held the cup in his hands, feeling the vibrations of his magic and soul bound to the relic of the Founder of Hufflepuff House.

“Thank you for your quick action, Xerxes. And thanks for the invitation to a game of chess.” He smirked, feeling much lighter with another piece of his soul back under his direct control. “I’m delighted to accept.”

Clearly getting the dismissal, Xerxes bowed, turned, and left the office, apparating away only a short time later.

Marvolo sat down at his desk, looking at the cup, feeling immense relief. Discounting the diary and the ring – still not returned to Marvolo by Dumbledore – which he had been forced to absorb because they both had been destroyed. He now had all his soul pieces back under his control. The locket and diadem were guarded in this house under heavy wards, and the cup would soon join them. But if he kept running into roadblocks and walls in his attempts to find ways to reabsorb them, or move them between containers – he had a vague theory that might work to move the pieces back into himself – he might never find a way that would work.

The interesting, engaging conversation he had had with the one Weasley boy, the curse-breaker, came to mind. Maybe Gringotts had a way to achieve what he was working on. The young man certainly had to be a member of Dumbledore’s Order if the old man had trusted him enough to take him along to the removal of the curse the old Headmaster had picked up from the ring. And if that was the case, the red-headed wizard now knew that Marvolo had created horcruxes. Maybe if he
asked in the right way, potentially by asking for help to get them back into himself and melded
with the soul residing in his body, the other would be willing to help.

And if Marvolo was honest, as long as he only asked for information and didn’t bring his horcruxes
and another potentially hostile wizard together, the risk was low.

Getting out a fresh sheet of parchment, Marvolo started to carefully started to compose a letter. He
needed to be aware that the letter might be intercepted, and even though William Weasley might be
sympathetic to his goal in this – the way the other had shown interest in magic most British
wizards would call evil suggested as much – were one of his family or associates to see the letter,
the consequences might be unpleasant. So he chose his words with care, offering a further
discussion of old magics and wards as a reason to meet. Hopefully the young man would agree.

oooOOooo

They had decided to have been born in the late fifties. That had been a time before their father had
married their mother. When he had travelled the world for several years, searching for interesting
magical sites, and entertainment. He had known then that once he was back in Britain he would
have to take over the family and all responsibilities associated with it. So he had seized any
opportunity for some fun.

At the moment Rudolphus and Rabastan sat over a list of the lands and regions their father had
travelled, crossing out all those which made it easy to track someone born there. All others,
annotated with notes on pro and contra, were copied onto a separate list.

There were a few places on the African continent, mostly in the Sahara and the West African rain-
forest, where the old practice of masters taking on pupils, instead of building centralized schools,
was the norm. Then there was China. Also a well-organized and ancient, tradition-rich magical
community, the devastation of the muggle-originated so-called cultural revolution had forced the
witches and wizards to move from traditional places – if only temporarily – erasing and destroying
many records during the sixties. Furthermore, the land had many rural areas without much of any
formal recording at all. Europe quickly was ruled out completely. The aftershocks from
Grindelwald’s and the muggles' wars had already lost their biggest impact by then, making tracking
someone all too easy, complicating the needed task to forge their identities.

There had been smaller Asian and South American communities their father had visited, but most
of them were either so close-knit that it would be hard to pretend to come from there, or they hadn’t
had enough upheaval to explain away the lack of proper documents.

“So it looks like we'll need to learn either one of those obscure African languages, or Chinese. That
will be fun.” The sarcasm was thick enough to walk on, and Rabastan gave his brother a rather hard
jab with his elbow.

“No need to be so enthusiastic, brother. Do you want to walk in the open again, or don't you?”

Rodolphus sighed. “Yes, I want to be free again, really free. But this is not an easy task. This plan
sounds impossible to manage. How shall we pretend to be anything but British wizards? We don’t
know any local spells, and either of those places has too unique a magical tradition to get by with
what we know already. Then there is the little fact of needing to learn a really complex language.
You can’t tell me learning a Chinese dialect and the symbols needed to read and write is an easy
task? And the African languages aren’t any easier. And on top of that, there's much less material available to learn them!” Rodolphus had started to get louder at the end there.

Rabastan could only nod. Comparing the problems his brother had just named to exchanging their mother’s contribution to their genetic material with those of another witch, ageing them to be the same age so they could pass as fraternal twins, the latter set of tasks seemed really easy.

“So we should go with a small South American community then? There was a pretty isolated one that was wiped out by an earthquake a few years back. Portuguese is much easier to learn than any of the Chinese, other Asian, or African languages and cultures.” Rodolphus looked rather sceptical, but was listening. ‘The culture is mostly European, with only a few truly local elements still preserved. At least in that community. It was mostly composed of descendants of immigrant European witches and wizards. As are the spells. If we pretend to having travelled a lot after we were old enough, being away when the disaster struck…” he trailed off. It was a rather daunting task that lay before them.

“So we start researching Portuguese, ways to learn a language quickly, and local spells, magical plants, and traditions?”

Rodolphus sighed again, but nodded. “And we probably should inform our Lord of our decision on a place of origin. Maybe he has some insight that would prove useful?”

They once again sank into contemplative silence, walking around the library, now collecting information about South American magical communities, Portuguese and Spanish, as well as any books on how to learn languages quickly.

ooooOOooo

The rest of the month of November moved quickly for Harry. The Professors were burying them under homework, and Hermione went right along with it, making schedules for revision for each of their friends. That group now included Theo, Neville, and Luna, who was helping with the schedules by making sure that they included leisure time. As she pointed out, a mind bogged down with facts lost its ability to fly. At first Hermione hadn’t liked that idea much, pointing out she already had kept evenings free for Ron and Harry to use for Quidditch practice, as well as Friday evening for the Duelling Club, and the weekends for Harry’s regular appointments and extra lessons, but had had to fold in the end.

Besides the regular meetings to complete their essays – all conducted in the library, because that was the best place for people from different houses to meet – Quidditch practice, daily calls with both Marvolo and Sirius, regular sessions with his mind-healer, and extra tutoring with Professor Snape, Harry didn’t have much time to paint or draw.

Most notable was the one Quidditch training session where Draco managed to catch the snitch before Harry because he had been looking after Cho Chang, the Ravenclaw Seeker, as their team had come to the pitch for practice before the Slytherin team had been finished. Draco and the rest of the team had fun teasing him over this. But luckily they kept the teasing to the common room, making sure the story didn’t get out to the whole school. Harry really began to appreciate the secretive nature of most Slytherins. It made sure embarrassing stories didn’t make it to the wider student population. But he had to concede that it was a real possibility that the fact he was Heir Slytherin had something to do with that as well.
When Harry asked after one particularly hard session with Mrs. Goyle if Marvolo was still going to her too, he got to see a really rare sight: Lord Slytherin, self-proclaimed Dark Lord, looking embarrassed. He had reluctantly said that he hadn’t been there after the one really short visit that had been the first session. Harry had asked, despite the fact he assumed it wasn’t the case, if Marvolo had too much to do and had not managed to find another appointment because of this. Marvolo had snorted – another first – and had denied Harry’s assumption. In fact, Marvolo feared that he might kill the woman in his frustration and so had decided not to tempt the fates. In a bout of reckless cheekiness, Harry had said that one could count that as a kind of progress, startling Marvolo into laughing. Looked at from a certain angle, one could really claim that his avoiding a situation where he might get so frustrated that he would kill was progress.

Before he really knew it, November was over, and the time until Christmas break was short. He would have to return to living with Marvolo, being dragged into the society nightmare that were the many events held over the month and into the new year. And he still had to find two presents for Marvolo: One for Christmas, or Yule as Marvolo insisted on calling it, and one for the man’s birthday. Remembering how happy he had been the first time he had gotten a real present for his birthday, Harry was determined to get one for Marvolo. Because somehow he was sure that the other had never had a sincere birthday present before.

With a new routine established, and many new experiences on the horizon, Harry wondered at how nice it was to know that Voldemort wasn’t after his life. The year so far hadn’t been peaceful, but with that many adults on his side, the problems had been easier to face than ever before.

Chapter End Notes

AN: This story slowly makes its way to over a hundred thousand over all views! It still feels unreal how many people read my little story. Just today LoveForBooks ‘p mentioned finding a link to my story on Facebook! Thank you all for sharing my travels to the end of this story.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Next chapter planned for 8h of September 2017

Story recommendation: “Luna Lovegood and the Dark Lords Diary” by “The madness in me”
A story in short chapters written as dialouge. It is refreshingly funny and in its form not something I have seen often.
Friday, 1st of December

Daphne sat with her dorm mates in the common room around one of the low study tables with nice cushioned chairs around it. They had placed two candlesticks at strategic points so they had enough light to write by, and were finishing as much of their homework as they could so they might have a little free time on the weekend.

But Daphne wasn’t really focused. She had decided to ask Harry today, as she was sure he wouldn’t think to ask her himself, and because she didn’t want to risk the chance that another girl would think to ask him first. But she was unsure how she should do it. None of her lessons ever covered how to ask a guy to be her casual date to a ball, or rather several balls, so she could attract the attention of possible candidates for marriage. The thought that her mother wouldn’t approve of her plan made her smirk.

There was no time like the present, so she closed her inkwell, gathered her things into a neat pile, and stood from her chair.

“What are you doing, Daph?” Millicent wanted to know, looking up from her herbology essay with a smudge of ink on her nose.

“Securing me a date for the winter festivities. You have ink on your nose.” Having the others distracted with this little hint about the ink, Daphne quickly walked over to the two wingback chairs by the fire, which were currently occupied by Harry and Theo, while Draco and Blaise sat next to them on the floor bend over a chess game. Draco with the white pieces clearly being in advantage.

Both other boys were reading. Theo had a book on the use of runes in warding open to a page in the middle. Harry was reading a book written in a language, or at least script, she never had seen before.

Taking a moment to compose herself, Daphne took the last steps and just started talking to get Harry’s attention. “Harry, do you have a moment?” He looked up, placing a strip of parchment between the pages of his book to mark his place. “I wanted to ask you something.” Only long practice prevented her voice from shaking.

“Sure, Daph. What was it that you wanted to ask?” He sat up a little straighter, sitting more like a proper young man, his attention turned to her as it should be.
Here goes nothing. If she wanted him as an escort, she had to ask him. And she would do so now, because she had decided that she would. “I know that you aren’t interested in me as a girl…” she huffed frustrated, that wasn’t the focus she wanted. “Do you want to be my date for the balls? Not as a prospective couple, but as friends. I know you are reasonably good at dancing, and not likely to bore me to death. Besides that, I think you aren’t really ready to take a girl you might be actually interested in to the ball, but you could help me get the attention I need to find someone for me. So will you go with me?” It was against everything she was used to, asking in such a way. In the middle of the common room, where everyone could see, and with such open words, without a way to back out without losing face. But she was sure this was the best way to get Harry to agree. She had observed his behaviour since the lessons over the summer, and she was sure that his placement in Gryffindor had been a good fit. As surely as he was a Slytherin, he still had many Gryffindor tendencies, and with those he wanted to trust as friends, Harry seemed to clearly prefer the Gryffindor way to handle things.

Harry blinked a few times, really slowly, before he smiled a little unsurely back at her. “Well, I hadn’t thought about it, but you’re probably right that I need a date, aren’t you?” he sighed, carding his hand through his birds nest of hair, making it even messier than it already had been. “Going as friends? I think I can do that. I would like that. Yes, Daphne, I would like to be your date to the ball, or balls. I guess we need to colour coordinate our robes?” He rolled his eyes a little at the last question, startling Daphne to laugh. Maybe they had subjected him to too many fashion lessons over the last weeks. Telling him how to combine an outfit and how important the first impression was, and the right statement, not only with how he acted and moved but with what he was wearing. Obviously he had listened attentively.

“We should try.” She tilted her head, trying to make out what the book was about, or at least what script it was in. “What are you reading?” she changed the topic. Now that the daunting task had been accomplished, her curiosity won out.

Seemingly glad for the shift and leaving fashion behind, Harry almost closed the book, keeping his finger as a marker between the pages. “It’s a book on magic and intent, and how the latter influences the outcome of spells, rituals, and the like. It’s written in parselscript. I’ve had it since the summer, but haven’t found the time to read in it much until now. It’s the only copy, and I wasn’t sure it would be… clever to read it up in the tower.” He seemed reluctant in his choice of word, but Daphne understood nonetheless. Something so obviously connected to Slytherin openly displayed among the Gryffindors could get the object in trouble, and even if they wouldn’t object, she always had suspected that the lions were rather wild and less refined, putting everything that found its way into the tower in danger of being damaged.

“Do you know how old it is?” She loved old handwritten books. It was a little sad that she couldn’t read that one, it sounded like the topic was really interesting.

“Not exactly, no.” Harry shook his head, stroking the spine of the book carefully with two fingers. “I only know that it’s a family heirloom.”

Daphne smiled and nodded. “I will leave you to your reading. There’s still time to make sure our robes don’t clash later.” She winked at him, giggling a little at his huff and resigned look. There weren’t many boys their age she knew who enjoyed the careful selection of colours for clothing.

With a bounce in her step she returned to her friends, to be interrogated on how her endeavour had gone.
Theo let his book sink into his lap. “You really hadn’t thought about your need for a date?” Harry shook his head, looking up to meet Theo’s eyes. “And it didn’t even occur to you to ask Hermione? She certainly would be happy to go with you. Don’t you think?” It was a pretty obvious solution to Theo. In years past he had always asked one of the girls he knew well, but knew he wouldn’t be able to marry, to go to the balls with him. This year his father had told him that he would have to go without a date, and dance with all the girls who might be a possible match for him.

Theo felt a little apprehensive about being considered old and mature enough to start looking for a bride. It was a big step, and he wasn’t quite sure yet what he wanted in a partner for life. He wasn’t even entirely sure he was into girls. He’d had dreams about Blaise for a while after the one time he had walked in on him last spring in their dorm. On the other hand, some traditions weren’t that easily broken.

Harry’s answer tore Theo from his musings. “No, I really didn’t think about asking her. She’s more of a sister to me. I can’t see her just as a girl. You know? And after the fiasco of last year’s Yule Ball, I’m not so sure she would have answered favourably, anyway.” A blush crept up his face, and Theo instantly was intrigued.

“What did you do?” He bent forward, his eyes glued to the bright red face in front of him, aware that Draco and Blaise were listening too.

“We might have asked her as a last resort, after agonizing far too long over who to ask. She was offended we thought no one would ask her, and that we hadn’t thought to ask her earlier. By that time Victor Krum had already asked her. It was all rather horrible, and I would prefer to leave it in the past.”

Seeing that Harry really was uncomfortable with the situation and aware that the other might fear the potential blackmail material – even so, it was rather weak material – Theo decided it was time to defuse the situation. So he started to tell a story of his earlier troubles with girls. Because who didn’t have some embarrassing situation with a girl in their past? Catching on quickly, Blaise and Draco joined in the fun, and soon the chess game and their books were forgotten, all four boys laughing and giggling over silly stories of interactions with girls.

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Harry had decided that it was time for him to go to bed. It was still slightly surprising how much easier it was to be by himself in the Slytherin dorms. Back in Gryffindor, Ron or one of the others would have complained that he wanted to go to bed so early, or even have mocked him for going to bed at a time only little kids got to sleep. The Slytherins either hadn’t the need to establish a reputation built on childish acts of defiance of common sense, or respected his decisions because he was the adopted son of the Dark Lord. Because that certainly was at least part of the reason he was left alone so much, and got to sit in the spot reserved for the most influential student of their House.

On the way to the hall leading to the actual dorm rooms, Harry walked by an alcove where two seventh-year boys were sitting, books, scrolls, and other materials on the table between them. As he passed them he couldn’t prevent hearing what the two were speaking about.
“He really will make you marry a witch?” the incredulity was clear to hear even while Warrington whispered, clearly unhappy about something.

The other boy nodded glumly. “Since the decree went out to increase the number of children, my uncle is adamant that everyone of the family procreates.” He snorted, letting his head fall back against the wall and the tapestry hanging there.

Harry’s mind was working quickly. If he was right, the boy talking to Warrington was named something Yaxley. And a Yaxley had been there that night in the graveyard. So it wasn’t really hard to work out what the two were talking about. But why would Marvolo’s order to his followers to find a partner and have bigger families, make the boy sitting here unhappy?

Before Harry could gather his thoughts and walk on he was spotted. Yaxley went pale and Warrington’s face became carefully blank. It was evident that they both thought it rather unfortunate that Harry was standing there. Because he was sure they would wonder what he had heard and if he would tattle to his guardian, Harry took a few steps and slipped into the alcove with them.

They didn’t object, watching the younger teenager warily. “I’m sorry, but I couldn’t help overhear part of your conversation,” Harry started in a careful tone, working on keeping a non-threatening, friendly mask in place. “You did sound unhappy over the prospect of getting married?” Harry made his statement sound like a question, not adding any of his suspicions to the implicit question, wondering where all those fancy words were coming from suddenly. It seemed talks with adults about politics had coloured his vocabulary quite extensively.

“It’s no secret that I’m gay.” There was bitterness in the boy’s voice, and Harry furrowed his brow in confusion. The Dursleys might have made comments implying that being gay was something bad, but all that Sirius and Marvolo had told him about the wizarding world’s view on this topic was the opposite of the Dursleys’. Being gay was something that was as normal as not being gay. So why was Yaxley so bitter about it?

Only asking questions would help him understand. So that was what he did. “Why would your uncle force you to marry a witch when he knows that? And how is your uncle even able to do that?” The looks briefly flickering over the older, bigger boys’ faces made Harry think he was missing something rather obvious to all who had grown up in wizarding Britain. For all that he had caught up on many things over the summer, there was still rather a lot he didn’t know.

But it seemed that his status as the Slytherin heir afforded him some leniency about those chasms still left in his knowledge, as Warrington started to explain, the other boy too unhappy to have the energy for it at the moment. “His uncle, Corban Yaxley, is the head of the family. Septimus’ father is the younger brother. And as the head of the family decides all the big things, he can force marriages to happen, can reject spouses he doesn’t approve of, and so on.” The look Septimus Yaxley had on his face was one of resignation and defeat. Harry thought that he would have looked murderous if someone had been trying to marry him off to someone he didn’t like. At least he wanted to think that he wouldn’t just go along with it.

Marrying for life was something different than being under the guardianship of someone whom you didn’t like. Or thought you shouldn’t like. Maybe even should hate? Either way, a guardian wasn’t important any longer when you became an adult. A wife wouldn’t just vanish.

Harry frowned. “How does that even work? The part with procreation. How does it even work if you like boys, men, whatever?” Would Marvolo want this to happen? And if the answer to this was yes, why did Marvolo have Professor Snape working on that potion making it possible for two men to have a biological child?
“Well, there are potions to make it work, like normal. I’m hardly the first forced to marry a woman to make sure a child is born. Wizards – and witches – have been forced to marry people they aren’t attracted to practically since the beginning of time. The continuation of the family line always was more important than something as trivial as happiness.” Yaxley snorted, rubbing his hand over his face and hair. He looked truly defeated.

Harry sat there, perplexed by the oddness of the wizarding world. Maybe not only the wizarding world. Fragments of half remembered lessons about history from his muggle school floated through his mind. Arranged marriages had been the norm in certain circles not so long ago. Marriages to gain more land, secure peace between nations, confirm alliances… the possibilities were endless. Taking into account that wizarding Britain still had many other outdated practices, it didn’t feel too far-fetched that this might truly still be happening.

“I just hope the witch father picks out for me, will be content to let me have an affair once the child is on its way. I don’t think I can live in celibacy just because a witch I hardly know doesn’t want me to stray.” There was bitterness in Yaxley’s voice, convincing Harry that this certainly couldn’t be right, and regardless of what Marvolo had planned, this couldn’t happen. There was a potion in development that would make children possible. And wasn’t it plausible to assume that there would be more than one child from Septimus Yaxley if he could marry someone he actually was attracted to? Someone he really loved?

“I’m not sure your uncle has it right.” Harry stated in a quiet voice, drawing the attention of the older teenagers to him. Green eyes fixed on the glimmer of hope barely visible in the depth of Septimus’ eyes. “Father has a Potions Master working on an old, unfinished potion he found in Slytherin’s journals. Its goal is to give two men a child with the help of a surrogate mother. Why create such a potion if it isn’t to be used?” A little late Harry realized that to make this better he had to talk with Marvolo about his plans, and ask him to put pressure on Corban Yaxley. But now that he had already stirred up the hope, he remembered only too well how bad it was when hope was smashed. When Sirius had to flee after third year and Harry didn’t go to live with him, it had hurt. He couldn’t allow that to happen, when all he had to do to help was speak with Marvolo the way he always did.

“I will speak with father. I know he doesn’t want to be misunderstood. Have a nice evening, you two.” With that last sentence Harry cut off any further conversation, standing to walk to his room. He had a call to make.

Because of his quick departure Harry didn’t see the calculating looks exchanged between Warrington and Yaxley. Was this the loyalty to those of his House that Professor Snape had alluded to the evening Slytherin had been re-sorted? If so, there might just be hope for Septimus.

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Saturday, 2nd of December

“I know you want to come, Sonja. And I would love to have you at my side. But it simply isn’t safe.” Severus tried to stay patient while he dressed in clothes cut to give him maximum freedom of movement. His trousers and boots were sturdy and warm, as were the robes he had selected. Sonja was looking on, cloak in hand, not really happy with him at the moment. “I never have been there, so I don’t know how the wards will react, or if there are any curses around that might act up. I have seen protections at the old family homes of other families that are set up to be a challenge.
To make sure a new heir claiming the title after the last Lord has died without passing it on directly is worthy. I don’t know enough to be sure the Prince family hasn’t done something like that. If you are by my side, I would have to divide my attention. Such a distraction can be fatal. I would love to take you with me. Believe me, I truly would. But not on this first visit.” It didn’t feel right to be stern. In a way it was like talking to one of his advanced potion students, talking them out of making an interesting experiment he just knew would end in a disaster.

A frustrated huff from Sonja made him turn and look as she sank onto their bed. “On a normal day I can live happily without magic. I have adapted to being surrounded by it while I can’t use it. But this is bloody frustrating. Knowing it might be dangerous, wanting to be there, cover your back, and knowing at the same time that it would be more dangerous if I was there.” She let herself fall backwards, staring at the canopy above their bed. “I want you to ask one of your colleagues to cast a monitoring charm on you, so they can go help you if there is a problem.”

Severus rolled his eyes. Even if he did that, if he managed to get himself into a situation where he would need help, it was highly unlikely for anyone to be quick enough to be able to help. “What if I take a portkey with me, spelled to activate if I lose consciousness, taking me straight to St. Mungo's? This way no one beside me would get into danger.” Negotiating was something familiar. Most of the time he had been forced to negotiate from a position of weakness. This might be actually the first time he negotiated with someone he considered an equal.

His wife – and wasn’t that a truly surprising development – sat back up, clutching her cloak and eyeing him speculatively. “Additionally, you will tell one other adult able to wield magic, and you will send a patronus message every thirty minutes.” There was a tremor hidden beneath the steel in her voice. She jumped as a load crack sent sparks up into the chimney. She was nervous.

Closing the last silk button on his robes, Severus took the few steps to stand between Sonja’s legs. He bent down to give her a caste, lingering kiss. “I will be careful, my love. And I will send a message to you as soon as I’m sure that the place is safe, and I’m Lord Prince. Maybe Minerva would like you to visit?” If he had to tell someone where he was going, his most staunch ally at the school was probably a good choice. He had told the Dark Lord, of course, but that wouldn’t really help Sonja cope with this.

Sonja nodded and the two of them started their trek up to Minerva’s living quarters. Saturday afternoons frequently were devoted to the marking of homework for all of them. Especially the OWL and NEWT students needed more elaborate remarks than just slashes, and crossed out and underlined parts of their work, so they could improve.

They didn’t meet many students in the corridors. Lunch was long over, and it was still many hours until dinner would be served. Now that the cold was almost omnipresent in the halls, any sensible person stayed in a heated room. So that meant either the library or one of the common rooms for the students, their quarters or offices for the teaching staff.

After Sonja had knocked, it didn’t take long for Minerva to open her door. “Severus! Sonja! What an unexpected visit. Come in, come in. It’s warmer in here.” The older professor took a step to the side, making the way free for them to step in.

“I have other things to do this afternoon,” Severus declined, guiding Sonja in direction of the door with a hand on the small of her back. “I intend to take a look at the old Prince Home, and take over the Lordship, as I’m the last of that line. Sonja can’t come with me on this first visit, and she demanded I inform another of where I go. I hope you will have a pleasant afternoon while you wait.” A quick glance assured Severus that Minerva had understood what he was asking of her. She would keep Sonja calm and distracted while Severus was away.
Giving his wife a quick kiss goodbye, Severus nodded to his colleague before he walked down the corridor with billowing robes. He shouldn’t wait any longer than he already had. If he wanted to officially claim his seat in the Wizengamot in the next regular meeting, he would need to claim the title soon. If there was a problem delaying him, there wasn’t much time to spare to get this all to work.

ooOoo

Between the things of his mother, in the last letter ever sent by her parents, there had been a portkey labelled with the simple word *manor*. Severus assumed that it was exactly what his grandmother had written in the letter wrapped around the small brass key. A portkey to the gates in the fence around the main property. It had been a revelation, reading all the letters his mother had never even opened. His grandparents had taken more interest in his academic achievements and his day-to-day life than he ever had expected. He asked himself what his life would have been like if his mother hadn’t been so stubborn and proud. But in the end, such questions were a waste of time. He would never learn what might have been different. It was a real possibility that he never would have been born.

Severus stepped through the gates to Hogwart’s grounds and at the same time outside the wards. His gloved hand retrieved the portkey from his cloak pocket, and he turned the small key over in his hand a few times. He was prepared. An emergency portkey to St. Mungo’s – the Dark Lord had given it to him, claiming that he didn’t wish to lose his Potions Master to something as silly as lacking preparation – hung around his neck. The small emergency potions kit was packed and stored securely in his pocket. There was a kind of alarm system established. Everything he could do was done.

Taking a deep breath, Severus tightened his grip on the portkey and spoke the activation phrase. “*Per aspera ad astra.*” (1)

After the colourful swirls and disorienting spinning of portkey travel had stopped, Severus effortlessly regained his footing. This Latin phrase had sparked his worry that there might be some kind of trial for him to face once he came here. It often was interpreted along the lines of the idea that there had to be dangers and obstacles to be overcome to reach a big goal.

In light of his suspicions, Severus cast several detection charms before he took a step closer to the wrought iron gate in front of him, right over the cobblestone path he stood on. There didn’t seem to be any curses or even alarm spells on the path, the gate, or the two fieldstone pillars holding the gate.

The walls were covered in common English ivy, blocking the view of the grounds behind them. Only a few bare treetops could be seen from where he stood. The gate looked well cared for. No grass or other plants had made their way onto the path, as they tend to do when a street isn’t travelled regularly. Maybe some kind of plant repellent charm, or a spell on the road to keep it clear?

Cautiously Severus took two steps forward, getting near the gate and the wards around the property that seemed to be bound to the property boundary. They felt non-threatening, friendly almost, for lack of a better term. So they probably recognized him as part of the Prince family. When Severus placed a hand on the gate it swung inwards on well oiled hinges, soundless. Either there were really good charms on all he had seen so far, or there was someone still looking after this place.
Maybe his grandparents had hired someone to look after the house and the grounds? Someone like Filch maybe?

With cautious steps, wand ready in his hand, Severus passed the boundary and closed the gate effortlessly behind him. The grass was covered with tiny ice crystals, the weak winter sun not strong enough to melt it. Beds were covered for winter, roses wrapped in rough cloth to protect them from the cold, all the leaves from the trees – oaks, one or two elm trees, maple trees, ash, all of them old – had been moved into piles, clearly indicating that someone was taking care of the place.

When the house came into view, Severus had seen a fair bit of representative garden. But judging by the size of the grounds, it looked like there might be a garden for vegetables and potions ingredients in the back, or somewhere out of the way.

The building itself was something to see. It was build in the style of the Tudor period. Small arches, tiny towers – more decorative in nature – intricate carvings, oriel(2) at several parts of the facade, dormers in the story just under the roof. Probably so the servants' quarters had a little more room. Parts of the house were covered with ivy, and it looked as well cared for as the rest of the grounds did.

Following the directions of that last letter, Severus walked up the stairs to the carved wooden door serving as the main entry point into the manor, placing his hand in the middle of the door near the knocker in the form of a dragon head. Wards flashed, but before Severus could yank his hand back, or cast a shield charm with the wand held in his right hand, the door opened with the click of a lock.

Casting his usual array of detection spells in quick succession, Severus watched with a funny feeling in his gut as candles all around the entrance hall flashed to life, casting their warm, unsteady glow over a tiled floor and priceless, handwoven carpets, onto several oil paintings that turned their judging eyes onto the lone wizard cautiously taking the last steps into the house, and several doors leading into different parts of the manor.

His grandparents had written down that the heir needed to go to the patriarch's study on the ground floor of the manor to claim the title of Lord Prince by placing the tip of his wand onto the family crest to be found there, and speaking the words of an oath. The letter had given directions to the study, and casting detection charms the whole time, Severus made his slow way through the halls and rooms, coming across a library and a music room with an old harpsichord covered by a linen cloth. Most of the furniture was covered with cloths, giving the house an abandoned atmosphere.

It wasn’t hard to find the study, and therefore the golden crest mounted on a carved piece of wood hanging over the fireplace situated next to the door through which Severus had entered the room.

Another series of spells was cast. Severus was suspicious. It was too easy. There hadn’t been a single spell that was dangerous, only one showcase with objects of a dark nature, but warded so unprepared hands wouldn’t be able to get to them and come to harm. Nothing that would prove a challenge. Had he been wrong to assume the activation phrase hinted at a test of some kind?

He hesitated a moment in front of the crest before he touched it with the tip of his wand. He had memorised the words of the oath and now spoke them, carefully enunciating each word. “I, Severus Tobias Snape, son of Eileen Prince, son of the Prince Family, do hereby claim the title of Lord Prince. To fill the responsibilities of a Lord to his people, to further the welfare of the wizarding community, to serve magic. So have I sworn, so mote it be.” Coming from the place where his wand touched the crest, magic swirled through the room. Testing Severus and his intentions, his plans and his determination, the magic wasn’t gentle to him as it wrapped around
him, bringing a sense of obligation, duty, and responsibility with it. A moment later Severus found himself sitting on the floor, panting, feeling a little light-headed. That hadn’t been what he had anticipated, or expected to happen.

“Master needs something to drink? Tea? Wine? Cherry so happy to have Master back!”

Startled by the happy, high-pitched voice, Severus turned to his right and came face to face with a happily bouncing elf with huge lavender eyes, wearing a toga crafted from two tea-towels.

It looked like his assumption someone had been taking care of the manor and the grounds had been right. Only, his guess that a Squib was the one, had been wrong. Pinching the bridge of his nose, Severus took a deep breath. On top of everything else, he now had his own personal elf to care for. Sending it to get himself something to drink might afford him some calm to think. And send a message to Sonja. If he was to wait any longer, she would worry needlessly.

“Bring me some cold water, Cherry. Then come back and wait. I have some questions for you.”

With a happy almost-shout of “Cherry will do that!” the elf was gone just long enough for Severus to cast his patronus and send a short message of “All went well. Will look around,” to Sonja.

When he next looked around, three elves were standing near the desk, bouncing on their toes, clapping their long spindly hands, ears flipping back and forth. In short, they were the image of eager anticipation and excitement. A crystal glass and pitcher were standing on a silver tray on the desk waiting for him to take a drink.

For the moment ignoring the three elves, Severus poured himself a glass of water and got out his potions kit. A sip from a headache potion would do him some good at the moment. He removed the stopper from the vial and added a healthy dose of the potion to the water, before storing the potion back in its slot in the kit. Then he swirled the glass, mixing the potion and water, before emptying the entire glass without pause.

Then he turned to the elves, who immediately started to babble when his attention was obviously on them. “Basil will clean Master’s bedroom today!” “Has Master a little Master or Mistress for Honey to care for?” “The House can be ready for Master this evening. Cherry will make sure of that!”

“Silence!” What had he done to be saddled with three house-elves? All families he knew had one, maybe two. Sometimes a few older but not as wealthy families shared in a family of elves. But an empty manor with three elves? He never had heard of anything like this. “I’m head of Slytherin House at Hogwarts and therefore live there most of the year. So it’s not important to make this manor ready to be lived in on the spot. I need a list of repairs needed on the grounds, as well as all keys to vaults you may have. Then one of you will give me a tour around the grounds, showing me everything of importance.”

“Cherry will do so!” the little elf said decisively. It looked as if she was the senior elf, or head elf, or whatever the title might be. All three were still beaming at him as if he were bringing sweets and they were children. It wasn’t a look he was accustomed to seeing aimed at himself. Sonja smiled at him, but this unadulterated joy wasn’t something he would associate with any sane adult.

Sighing, Severus sent Basil and Honey – whoever had named those elves seemed to have had a fixation on food – to gather a list of needed decisions, and then ordered Cherry to show him around.

Somehow this had been too easy. Maybe the true obstacles would show themselves later, when he
went to claim his seat on the Wizengamot. In a way, he would have felt better if there had been some nasty curses in the Manor or the study, something to test him, something to overcome. Now he felt as if Mad Eye Moody’s motto of constant vigilance would get to be his own for a long time to follow. Paranoia had been his friend and companion for years now, it had been silly to hope that his need for it would diminish in the future.

The rest of this Saturday Severus spent touring an extensive garden, or rather park, and the much-too-big manor. He would have to go through the ledgers in the study to see what else there was and how much everything had descended into chaos while there had been no one around to take care of the estate.

That was probably something that Sonja would be able to help him with.

Only one thing was sure: the future held many unknowns for Severus, many challenges, and opportunities, as well as dangers.

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Wrapping a big scarf around his neck, Arthur walked out of the back door and into the garden. The frozen grass made crunching sounds under his heavy boots. Winter was making its first tentative moves into their region. Under the light of the almost full moon, he found his way through the unkempt garden down to the orchard. If he couldn’t find his eldest there, he would have to search the rest of the grounds, but he was pretty sure that Bill had gone there. Probably to think.

Most of the family went down there to think. It always had been the place that held the least chaos at any given time. Molly had been down here often since Albus had called the Order back together. Each thing happening had made her stays down there more often and longer. Harry’s being adopted, Albus’ telling them that You-Know-Who had split his soul, the Order’s breaking apart… It hadn’t been easy ever since the end of the Tri-Wizard-Tournament.

Shaking his head to clear his mind, so he would be able to concentrate on the here and now, Arthur cast a Lumos so that he would be able to see under the trees. The branches were bare, letting light fall through, but the ground was treacherous, with fallen branches, long grass, and rotting leaves covering it all. An eclectic torch – or something similar to that – like the Muggles used to carry a small light around would be nice, he would have his wand free to cast other spells and still be able to see. Maybe he should get himself one for Christmas.

He found Bill at the other end of the orchard looking out over the field on the other side of the simple fence, something clutched in one of his hands. With a few more steps Arthur was at his son’s side, leaning against the fence, looking onto the frost-covered meadow on the other side.

“What’s the matter, Bill? You’ve been quiet the whole time through tea. And now you’ve been out here for a quarter of an hour already. Talk with me, Bill. Maybe I can’t help, but I’ll try, and you know that talking can clear up things. Do you have trouble at work? Or with Miss Delacour?” The last was Molly’s suspicion. Bill had spoken about the girl he was dating rather often, and his mother was convinced that the French girl wasn’t good enough for her son. Arthur wasn’t so sure she was right, but he didn’t know what was really the reason for Bill’s moodiness, so he hadn’t said anything.

Bill sighed. “Everything’s fine at work and with Fleur. No, I’m thinking about a letter I got a while
back. An acquaintance asking for help, you could say, but I’m unsure if I should help.”

Arthur was taken aback. He had thought he had brought up his children better than that. “Why would you even hesitate? If you can help someone asking for help, you should help to the best of your ability!” There wasn’t a question about that in Arthur’s mind. If one was able to help a friend, that was what one should do.

Bill snorted. “You don’t even know who asked, or for what! But I will explain the circumstances of what he’s asking for. We’ll see how you feel about this then.” That reaction made Arthur’s stomach drop. Bill hadn’t said that a friend had asked for help, and he wasn’t a boy any longer. It was a possibility that someone had asked for help gaining access to Gringotts past its security measures. But that surely wasn’t the case, because then Bill wouldn’t have to brood about it. Declining such a request for help should be easy.

“Oh, dad, listen. This acquaintance has made many mistakes in the past. At least now he calls them mistakes. He knows that I’m well versed in dismantling dark curses, wards, and so on. At the moment he claims that he’s working on undoing curses he placed on some objects he doesn’t want to destroy. It looks like he’s run into a block, and needs another perspective on the matter and asked me if I would be willing to get him information from the goblins, or point him in the right direction for his research.” Sticking his hands into his robe-pockets, Bill stopped talking, clearly waiting for his father to say something.

“Well…” Arthur was unsure. That did sound a little ominous. Maybe he didn’t have enough information to base his advice on. “Why doesn’t he turn the objects in to the Ministry? There are a few Aurors who are willing to take such things off the hands of someone wanting to get rid of them. Without filing a report and all that. Anonymous, you could say.”

But Bill was already shaking his head. “If he would do that, it would get out to the public. It certainly would, and I understand why he can’t risk that. I was even surprised that he dared to write me at all. You see, with our family's reputation, our association with Dumbledore, I would have never thought…” Another sigh producing a small cloud of mist in front of Bill’s face could be heard. It was getting rather cold out here. Arthur stuck his hands beneath his arms in a bit to keep them warm.

“If your acquaintance really wants to leave his mistakes and a bad past behind him, I think you should help him. If there is no way out of such a pit, no one will ever attempt to leave a dangerous path… so yes, if you don’t get into conflict with the law, or risk your life, I would say you should help him.” Arthur was a little proud of himself for adding those last two qualifications. He had to remember that his children were getting older, and their problems became increasingly complicated accordingly.

“And would you still say the same, when I tell you Lord Slytherin wrote me to ask for help, and that the dark objects we are speaking about are horcruxes? What then?” The sarcasm in Bill’s voice was a surprise, but considering the additional information his oldest son had just dumped on him, it seemed to be logical. Add to the problem that the former Dark Lord – Arthur wasn’t so sure about that claim – had rescued Bill and one could claim there might be somewhat of a life debt involved, it got only more complicated.

Taking the prolonged silence as a confirmation for his suspicion, Bill snorted again. “See, and the moment you hear that name, you disregard everything you just said. Mum doesn’t believe he has changed, I’m not sure, and you… I don’t know what you think about all this. You’re unusually silent on this topic.” Bill turned to look at Arthur, who turned so he could rest his right arm on the fence.
Furrowing his brow in thought, Arthur tried to formulate a response to that. He had been unusually silent, but he truly didn’t know what to think. So he shrugged. “You know that it’s complicated, with your uncles killed in the last war. All the others that we knew and who were killed. And now here he is, starting fresh where no one else could.” Again he hadn’t taken a firm stance on either side of the matter, but he hoped that Bill would be able to understand him anyway.

“So you still think everyone deserves a second chance, as long as they truly wish to change their ways, but you have trouble with granting it to someone who has done so much evil and wrong in the past?” Arthur shrugged again. He was proud that his son had managed to piece it together that well, but he still couldn’t bring himself to actually voice the idea that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named should get another chance. It somehow felt wrong, despite his conviction that everyone should get a chance to change their ways. It was all a really tangled mess.

“Are you able to help? And do you think his request is genuine?” Arthur cast warming charms on both of them, under the clear night sky it was getting really cold.

Bill nodded. “He asks about a way to move soul pieces from object to object without destroying either. The goblins have something like that, but they don’t teach it to non-goblins. Normally we just destroy whatever object contains a soul piece. It’s easier, and I guess it’s not worth the hassle. I have picked up bits and pieces… But giving information like that to an outsider? I never would do something like that.” Looking contemplative again, Bill turned further so that his back was to the fence. “Let’s get inside. Mum is probably frantic by now, and I’m starting to freeze.”

The rest of the evening passed with talks about Molly’s disapproval of foreign girls, her happiness over Bill’s decision to come back to England, leaving the dangers of tombs behind, and her wish that he would spend some time with Miss Tonks.

When Bill said he wanted to head back home to his flat, Arthur walked him to the edge of the wards, while Molly started to clean up the kitchen, soap bubbles flying everywhere, the dishes washing themselves.

“Don’t let her get to you about that girl of yours.” They both rolled their eyes, Molly loved to match-make, and neither of them agreed with her meddling. “And if you need to talk again about anything, I’m always willing to listen.” Arthur grabbed his son’s shoulder giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“I know, dad. And I think I’ve decided what I’ll do. If he’s willing to send me his notes, I’ll take a look and point out any obvious errors. That should help, but shouldn’t anger the goblins. I better get home and write a letter. See you, dad!”

Once Bill was outside the wards, he spun on his heel and vanished. After a moment staring at the almost full moon half vanishing behind trees and the house, Arthur took a deep breath and sighed. Why had You-Know-Who decided to take up the title of Lord Slytherin and make his return into society so blatantly obvious? Why hadn’t he decided to start over as someone else? It would have been so much easier for them all to leave the past behind, had the man just done that instead!

Looking forward to his warm and cosy bed, Arthur walked back to the house, determined to help Molly with the few things that she still had to do, before they would go to bed, maybe read for a while and then hopefully sleep peacefully.
With a glass of red wine in one hand and an artificial – but genuine-looking – smile on his face, Marvolo stood in the magically heated garden behind the Bones residence, watching as the other guests slowly arrived. The full moon and a few strategically placed torches and fairy lights made the area just light enough that everyone could see comfortably. Off to one side, in a small gazebo, some instruments were set to play soothing music that blended into the background but provided a nice distraction.

Lucius walked over to him, smiling the politically polite smile he always wore around people he had to work with. “Marvolo, how are you on this fine evening? Madame Bones has outdone herself this year, don’t you think?” the blond asked, indicating a few non-melting ice sculptures standing about as decoration. One faun near them was holding a cornucopia from which real fruit was offered to the guests.

“As this is my first visit to one of her winter parties, I wouldn’t know, would I?” Marvolo smiled a more genuine smile. Interacting with his own followers was preferable to standing alone, the possible target of matchmaking mothers. Then he chuckled. “Tell me, is Draco having a hard time with his schoolwork, or is my son the only one? Henry asked me if it was possible to attend some of the functions and parties with me, so he would get a break from writing essays and taking notes during the professors’ lectures. He complained about the massive amount of work they have to do for their OWLs. I feel by the end of the month I probably will be willing to switch places with him. A boring lecture from Binns to sleep through might be exactly what I need then.” Or, as an alternative, not quite killing Igor with curses. Socializing with those he could barely stand on such a regular basis as he would have to do in the next few weeks could easily try his patience beyond its limits.

Lucius chuckled as well, his strain carefully hidden behind his polite mask. “My son has voiced similar complaints in his last letter. I remember quite vividly how strenuous OWL year was on me. But I’m sure they will pull through. The young heiress Lestrange seems to be intent on making them all comprehensive study plans.”

They descended into polite but insignificant small talk, while Marvolo remembered what else Henry had told him last night. On Friday his son had informed him about Yaxley’s interpretation of his order to have more children and bigger families. As his son had assumed, he was not happy that the man had been about to force his gay nephew to marry a witch. Such unions traditionally only ever produced one child. So Marvolo had summoned the man through the Mark and had corrected that misunderstanding. Yesterday Henry had informed him how grateful Septimus Yaxley was about this intervention. Judging by the way Corban Yaxley – the boy’s uncle – was avoiding him tonight, the man wasn’t over the humiliation of the correction Marvolo had had to administer.

Marvolo’s musings were interrupted when Madame Bones herself came to speak with him and Lucius. With a small bow of his head, Marvolo – as the one higher in rank – greeted their host. “Madame Bones, let me congratulate you on this lovely evening. The food and drinks are wonderful, and I see that you are taking the security of the Ministry’s personnel quite seriously.” With a lazy wave of his hand, Marvolo indicated the Aurors in full uniform scattered around the crowd of witches and wizards working in the Ministry in one capacity or another. It was the least prestigious of all the winter functions, but also the one that no one could just miss. There were
even Aurors patrolling the property's border. Considering that it was the night of the full moon and what had happened on the last full moon, it wasn’t an unreasonable precaution.

“Thank you, Lord Slytherin. I will relay your compliments to my elf.” She looked around the crowd in their finest robes, her eyes brushing over the well built forms of the two wizards standing in front of her, taking in their expensive robes so clearly outclassing those of the majority of those attending. It was obvious that they had done this deliberately, following an unspoken custom among the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot. Attending this party hosted by a Ministry Department Head – only the big and important Departments were ever eligible to host it – but making sure everyone knew they felt it beneath them.

Some, like Dowager Longbottom, would not flaunt it as obviously, but they all did it.

“Why don’t you mingle a little, Lord Slytherin. It is a good opportunity to get to know a few more people than those you are already acquainted with.” There was a dangerous twinkle in her eyes, and Marvolo was sure it was a challenge. She wanted to force him to interact with more people than his political allies – not that she knew they were still truly his followers – or his political adversaries, but with the normal wizard from next door. Maybe he should really do so. It could be a way to find a few new people who might fit in with his Death Eaters. Because of his need to be extremely careful – he couldn’t risk being discovered – he hadn’t added to his numbers anyone truly new since his return.

Before he could form a reasonable response the howl of a wolf sounded. All around him the people fell quite, the background music suddenly the loudest sound. The howl rose again just to be joined by another a few seconds later. Then a third voice joined into the chorus and panic broke loose.

Witches screamed and ran. Wizards were losing their nerve, milling about aimlessly, unsure what to do or where to go. Aurors tried to get a somewhat organized retreat going. Small tables were overturned, and glass shattered on the ground.

With his pale wand in hand, Marvolo was scanning the hedges and trees at the edge of the garden, looking for the movement of a charging werewolf.

Maybe he should have done something about Greyback before now. But there always was so much to do. Banishing all errant thoughts from his mind, Marvolo noticed several Death Eaters looking in his direction. With a few hand signs he quickly had them ordered into positions somewhat resembling an ordered assault team. Hopefully no one would pick up on the fact that some of those looking for his direction during a situation likely to escalate into a fight were Aurors. That could spell trouble in the future.

Suddenly he found himself beside Madame Bones in a position to guard her back and depend on her to do the same for him, when the first of several werewolves broke through the hedges. The fight was on.

Chapter End Notes

(1) Per aspera at astra is a latin phrase that can be found in many places. If you try to translate it as directly as possible it goes something like “through rough times to the stars” or “over rough paths to the stars”, “through adversary to the stars”, or even more rough “through the rough to the stars”. I never tried to translate latin directly into English, so maybe it isn’t truly accurate. :D but the idea is close enough.
(2) oriel: I have searched a while for a translation for what I would call “Erker” in
german. Bay window was one I found, but that’s not really what I was looking for.
Because I wanted the one not reaching the ground but starting somewhere in the
middle of the building. If some of you have a better word for it please tell, I’m curious
how you would call it!

This is somewhat of a cliffhanger. But the chapter was long enough and I wanted to
take a small break before attempting to write a genuine fighting scene. It will be a first
for me! I hope you all aren’t too cross with me ^^

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Party Crasher

Tuesday, 5th of December

Fearful eyes were almost glued to one of the first terror-inducing beasts that had crawled under and through the hedges at the edge of the party. The shaggy fur was long and thick enough to keep the beast warm in the cold weather. The small eyes peered evilly about, searching for easy prey. Sharp fangs glistened with the saliva dripping from them to the frozen ground. Their growls made all hairs on her arms stand on end.

Mafalda had ducked behind a table that had been overturned. She was too afraid of encountering a werewolf were she to run towards the house along the hedges bordering the garden. They were coming through the hedges in several places. Her frantic search for a better place to hide, eyes hectically flicking left and right, didn't yield any results. So she decided to stay put, even if she wished she were somewhere else. Anywhere else! She cast longing glances to the house further down. Maybe there would be an opportunity to run to safety if she kept watching.

A yelp made her turn from the house to the tall figure standing beside Madame Bones, shielding each other's backs. A shaggy wolf lay on the ground, trying to get back on its paws, while four others parted ways to stalk around it to attack the witch and wizard fighting them. She watched as spell after spell was rapidly cast – squeaking with each splash of colour, shivering as if doused in cold water – an Incarcerus from Madame Bones entangling one wolf in strong cords, binding its front paws together so it tumbled snout-first into a pile of snow. It started to chew on the ropes, while a strong blast sent from Lord Slytherin's pale wand sent another wolf flying into two more.

There were so many wolves! She never had thought that there were so many werewolves in Britain! It was simply too much to comprehend!

Suddenly glass shards all around rose into the air, started to move forward – towards the fight just mere feet from her hiding place – and became daggers shining like silver in the unsteady light. Then the daggers were flying like Quidditch players towards the wolves, some impacting with dull sounds, others falling to the floor with clattering sounds. One wolf howled, sending a cold shiver over Mafalda's back. Why? Oh, why had she decided to be here today?

Behind her she heard the sound of running feet, high heels rapidly falling onto stone floors, urgent
voices deep and high. But she didn't turn, too mesmerised by the two fighting in front of her, keeping the wolves at bay. They were casting constantly now, one spell seemingly seamlessly flowing into the next, wolves dodging and jumping to avoid the vivid fire of spells, shaking themselves, thick fur standing on end, after being hit by stunners.

And they were eerily quiet. Not a word uttered, not a single incantation used. As if they had lost their voices, only the wolves and those fleeing behind her making any sounds.

Mafalda hadn't been good at Defence, but she knew that a stunner normally would take out its target if it hit. A surprised gasp escaped her, one hand clutching her wand tightly when she saw one wolf just shaking when hit with a spell she had thought to be a stunner. How strong were those beasts?

She watched as a blond wizard in blue robes – she thought that she recognized Lord Malfoy – ran to the side of Lord Slytherin casting a spell that sent another wolf tumbling into two of its brethren.

Now with three people fighting them at this part of the hedge, it seemed as if the wolves were hesitating, changing their plan. The moment an Auror came to her hiding spot, dragging Mafalda to her feet, tugging on her arm, urgently demanding, "Follow me. Come on, you can't stay here!" she had to split her attention. Tripping over her own feet would be a problem, making her into an even easier target.

The witch watched, while being dragged to safety, as a wall of blue flames sprang up from the ground, reaching high into the starlit sky, one wolf not quick enough to avoid running into it, catching fire on the spot, falling down on the other side of the wall, rolling around with pained howls breaking from between its jaws.

Then she was inside the house, the Auror who had gotten her from the place behind the table handing her over to another, who ushered her to a loveseat where she sank to sit, her knees too weak to stand any longer.

"Werewolves are monsters! Mindless, savage monsters! With no other goal than to harm wizards! What a mess!" one witch sitting a few feet away called out, repeating herself over and over until one Auror pressed a phial into her hand, which she drank down just to calm down once she had emptied the small glass container. Mafalda thought that she would like a calming draught herself.

Shouts of incantations, the howls and snarls of the wolves, shattering glass and ice, and breaking wood were just barely to be heard underneath the frightened chatter of those cowering in the house. The stench of burning hair filled the air, mixed with the unpleasant smell of urine and vomit. Mafalda just wanted to go home. No, be home.

At last Madame Bones walked into the room, followed closely by a tired looking Lord Slytherin, both of them drenched and flushed, heated by the fight. A big stone fell from her chest. The way those two incredible fighters walked, it was clear that the danger was over. With a sigh Mafalda fainted, sinking into the witch sitting right next to her.

ooOoo

Amelia stuffed her handkerchief back into her robe pocket while she turned to one of the Aurors who had been responsible for security today. "It looks like the werewolves have left, Madame Bones. At least seven of them are dead. We're still checking those lying about. So far it looks like no one was infected, but there have been many injuries from broken glass and the like, so we'll need to check thoroughly..." Listening with one ear, Amelia looked over to where Lord Slytherin sat on a stool, still keeping watch over the edge of her gardens from the stool he had transfigured
from some wreckage that had been lying about.

She hadn't missed how Lucius Malfoy, and others who had been let off after the war on claims of having been forced to take the Dark Mark, had looked in the man's direction, as if looking for guidance or commands. Maybe it wasn't so surprising. Whether they had taken the Mark willingly or not, they had been trained to look for him and his orders in a fight. Such structures when trained enough didn't vanish overnight. They became instinctual. As they should, if they were to be relied on in a fight. It was one thing Rufus always demanded from his new trainees. Train in teams until the command structure was second nature to them.

Nonetheless it was an interesting observation to make.

And she had noticed that he obviously had rigorous combat training. He had only used hand signs as all Aurors were taught, so information to be shared around could be made seen even if one person was silenced, or had to use incantations at the same time.

That the spells he had used all had been legal – no killing curses, or overly dark curses – wasn't something she had missed either. There wasn't much doubt by this point that he was serious about keeping to a legal appearance, at least in public situations. She still had a few doubts about his actions in a more private setting, but just knowing what he probably still did wasn't a crime. This ruling was a holdover from the time many spells, wards, potions, rituals, etc. had been declared forbidden. They couldn't condemn those that had learned about those suddenly banned things before they had become illegal. Learning them, teaching them, using them was a crime, but not simply knowing them. And as for the learning and teaching part of that, exceptions were regularly made. They needed their curse-breakers to know how to deal with old things that occasionally came up somewhere, after all.

"Get everyone who is not an Auror into the house. Place two Aurors at each main entrance, bar the rest with the emergency wards. Get Healers from St. Mungo's over here, and start taking statements. No one will leave!" Amelia gave her orders. Rufus was somewhere around too, but as the Head of the DMLE, she was the one in charge. The Auror nodded and moved to do as he had been told.

Turning to Lord Slytherin, Amelia noticed the red spots of blood that had soaked into the snow covering the ground for the first time as more than a peripheral. Maybe she should ask a Healer to look her over too. This perceiving things in snatches was a symptom of shock.

"Lord Slytherin, you should go into the house with the others." When he looked up, she was reminded of the one time she had been part of a battle where Voldemort had been present. There was an intensity in the wizard's gaze that sent a cold shiver down her spine. Luckily the knowledge of who he had been hadn't distracted her during the fight.

"Of course, Madame Bones. But please know that I'm willing to offer assistance in securing the area if there should be need." He stood gracefully, robes only a little wrinkled. As there had been no wizards on the other side of the fight, and they had managed to keep from actually coming in contact with the werewolves, they didn't look as if they had been fighting for their lives at all. It was staggering not to look as if you had just fought for your life, when you had been.

She watched for a moment as he walked away, wand still in hand, ready to react should one of the probably dead werewolves lying around get up again, before she turned to make sure the garden and surrounding area were secured, banishing her musings over the mystery of Lord Slytherin from her mind.

ooOoo
Sitting with a few other notable figures of the Wizengamot, Marvolo watched the Minister get his bearings back, while Healers and Aurors were milling about, tending to the wounded and taking statements from everyone. Their group hadn’t been questioned as of yet, but if they didn’t come over soon, he would seek them out. He wanted to go home, and plan his own actions in regards to those rogue werewolves following Greyback. If they came face-to-face again, he wouldn’t let the other leave again.

Suddenly the conversation between Cornelius and the new temporary Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports – Marvolo hadn’t bothered to remember the man's name yet – came to a halt, Madame Bones stepping up to their seats arranged around a low table. "Minister, I thought you would be happy to know that the wards around the grounds weren't broken. In fact, they worked as intended. But," she held her hand up to interrupt Cornelius who clearly wanted to demand an explanation how the dangerous, dark creatures had it made onto the grounds, and kept speaking, "it looks like they came over the ward line before changing. The fact that there have been many people coming and going today to prepare the party seems to be the reason they went unnoticed when they crossed the wards to a little grove. It looks like they had help coordinating the setup. We will need to investigate further to be sure."

A few other wizards and witches had come closer while Madame Bones gave her explanation to the Minister. Now Amos Diggory – the father of the boy Pettigrew had killed at the Graveyard – leaned over the back of a lounge some of the department heads were sitting on and argued with his arms swinging in wild gestures. "With the way the legislation was changed over the last months, something like this just had to happen! Give them a little opening, just a little less rules, and they lose all restraint!" The man pointed at Marvolo, a dark look, almost a scowl on his face. "With how he has pushed for the laws to change, what could we have expected?!"

Marvolo thought that he couldn't very well let this stand as it had been said, especially because others had started to chime in on the same vein. Several voices mingled, only parts of what they said audible over the din. "They're just animals. Vicious animals!" "After that we should kill them all!" "I always knew they can't help being monsters!"

Seeing that it would be almost impossible to gain anyone's attention without shouting – and that would be undignified – Marvolo cast a reversed version of the Notice-Me-Not charm that was rather less well known than its normal version. It had been after he had read about sirens that he had started to experiment with a charm like this. He had thought it could come in useful.

It didn't take long for the eyes of those surrounding him to turn his way. "Mr. Diggory is correct in his assumption, that this is a reaction to the change in laws. But why those particular werewolves have reacted in this way, there he is quite mistaken." As soon as he had started to speak the attention of all in the immediate vicinity was on him. This spell was really handy, but he had to be careful, as the effect could be easily detected and didn't work well on those with efficient Occlumency shields. "Fenrir Greyback resents those changes. He is of the opinion that werewolves are better, stronger than humans, and that they could overrun humans if they just were of greater numbers. That is why he tries to infect children and take them away from their families. To raise them away from human culture, indoctrinate them in his philosophy. My political associates and I have been working on making it easier for werewolves to stay away from extremists such as Greyback. Of course he would react to this threat to his powerbase."

And now to add the bit that would make him look human, relatable, "I admit that I didn't anticipate the vehemence with which he would react. This attack seems to be more of a desperate act. There were so many capable witches and wizards here, I'm unsure of what he hoped to accomplish."

To make sure those surrounding him wouldn't catch on to the fact he had manipulated them a little with his spellwork, Marvolo wandlessly and silently dispelled the charm, turning his own gaze to the Minister, who naturally would be the next to speak.
But it was the Chief Warlock Abbott who spoke next. "I think we should call a meeting tomorrow, let Madame Bones, or Head Auror Scrimgeour, lay out the facts, then hear opinions on the happenings of this evening before we move on to gather ideas on how to deal with this." The old wizard stood, bringing order to his robes. "I will leave now to set everything in motion for this. I trust our Auror office and the DMLE will be more than able to handle everything else."

ooOoo

Blinking his eyes slowly, Harry rolled onto his back, his blankets and comforter pulling at his legs with the motion. It had to be the middle of the night, and Harry wondered why he had woken. His nightmares had gotten fewer and fewer – with a few occasional flares when he had a particularly hard session with Mrs. Goyle, which was normal, she had assured him – and he had been dreaming something pleasant he no longer remembered before waking up. Or at least he was pretty sure he had dreamed something pleasant. Harry frowned, still not really awake.

Then he heard the sound of something vibrating in the wooden drawer of his desk, and he was out of bed, standing beside the desk and opening the drawer in the blink of an eye. Who of the two was calling him in the middle of the night? Harry knew that it was the full moon and that Sirius had used that as an excuse to stay with Remus, not going to the function Marvolo had complained about.

Either of them would wait until the morning to call him if it wasn't that important. While he reached for both mirrors to see which one was vibrating, Harry wondered if he truly was afraid that something might have happened to Marvolo. It still felt somehow wrong that the man who had killed his parents, made him an orphan, had become someone so important in his life. As he did each time when his doubts arose, and the feeling that the world, his friends, would hate him if he should show or admit that Marvolo was someone important to him, Harry reminded himself of what Mrs. Goyle had said. Everyone deserved to be happy. Marvolo Slytherin was a different man than Tom Marvolo Riddle had been. Marvolo wasn't Voldemort. The differences might be minuscule in some respects, but in others they were like day and night. He shouldn't let the public, people he didn't even know, dictate how he should act concerning his happiness. No one needed to understand him but he alone. And it was totally acceptable not to understand himself at the moment. Some people never understood themselves and led happy lives nonetheless.

Harry wasn't sure he really understood. Sometimes he felt his head had finally gotten the message to not feel guilty over his growing attachment to Marvolo, but he was sure his heart would probably break in two over the strain between guilt and that new feeling of family.

Holding both mirrors, Harry felt that the newer mirror was vibrating. Marvolo was calling. ..Yes?.. he hissed in Parseltongue, accepting the call, while depositing the other mirror back into the drawer with appropriate care.

..Henry, I'm sorry I woke you.. Marvolo started, the hangings behind him indicating he was sitting on a small settee in his bedroom at Griffin House. ..I wanted to make sure you heard what happened from me, and not the rumour mill that will make it into a horror story before the day is out:.

Frowning at the tired look on the other man's face, and the absent minded way he stroked the back of Nagini's head where she was hanging over his shoulder, Harry wasn't really sure he wanted to know ..What happened? Are you okay?..

..I didn't come to any harm. But I'm tired. When we finally were allowed to leave, it was already quite late. As for what happened, Fenrir tried to take revenge, at least I think he did.
I can't really fathom what his plans might have been:. Red eyes slowly blinked, underlining the claim that Marvolo was tired.

.:So he used the full moon to attack the Ministry party at the Bones Residence?:. There wasn't any other possibility. Marvolo had explained the purpose behind this particular party and had spent the most time on being cross over the fact that he couldn't skip this particular event. When he had heard that Sirius would opt out under the pretext of caring for a friend, he had expressed something akin to envy over the fact the other man had such a ready excuse at hand.

.:Exactly. They came through the hedges well into the party. I must say that cursing the Defence position at Hogwarts had the effect I had hoped for back when I placed it. There are frighteningly few wizards and witches capable of defending themselves, or even thinking when under attack, or really only the threat of attack. You're sure the current professor isn't one worth keeping?:. Nagini hissed lazily, flicking her tongue out, clearly searching the warmth of her human.

.:Not if you want people able to defend themselves. He is a pacifist. He makes us practice de-escalation, role playing different scenarios over and over:. Harry rolled his eyes, slowly walking back to his bed, sitting down on its edge. .:But if you're asking if you should remove the curse on the position, yes, you should:. Harry had thought quite a while about this. Whether he should ask for Marvolo to remove the curse or not. He had no single good experience with demanding something from an adult, in whatever way. The Dursleys had always made sure he didn't get things he asked for, and then he had simply stopped, preferring to take care of things himself. Mrs. Goyle claimed the job of a parent was to listen for what their children asked for and give them help when necessary, even help their children pursue their interests. As he hadn't much experience with adults and children, and their interactions with each other, Harry could only call on what he had watched between his aunt, uncle, and Dudley, as well as the interactions in the Weasley family. The way Dudley had always gotten what he asked for probably wasn't the right way to go about things as parents, but considering what they had done to Harry… well, Mrs. Goyle had said that they certainly didn't know right from wrong, and had been treating Harry wrong the entire time. And the Weasleys certainly did listen to their children. Not that they were able to give them what they all wanted, or that Mrs. Weasley didn't have a firm idea of what her sons should be doing with their lives – she certainly didn't approve of the curse-breaking Bill was doing – but they at least always listened.

Harry was startled out of his thoughts by the clearing of a throat. .:If you want to watch me undo it, I will do it during break?:. The hissing sounded like a question. At first Harry was stunned that Marvolo actually agreed to undo the curse, then he was suspicious about the man's motives. Why would he want Harry to be there for it?

.:It's not Dark Magic, if that is what you're fearing. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's fairly standard fare for any curse-breaker. So no need to look so cross:. Marvolo chided with one raised brow.

Harry ducked his head. He still had trouble controlling his facial expressions. And he knew he had to get that under control. It was another of those topics on which the portrait of his grandfather and Marvolo agreed. Grandfather Charlus had explained that a politician wearing his feelings openly for all to see was much too easy to manipulate and take advantage of. Not a position Harry would want to be in. So he probably would have to learn this cold mask thing all the adults mixed in politics around him were doing.

So that he wouldn't have to decide if he wanted to watch or not, Harry changed the subject. .:This
will harm the changes you are pushing for regarding the laws about werewolves, won't it? They will use the attack to gather people behind them with fear as a motivator.:

Marvolo nodded, something gleaming in his red eyes that Harry had trouble identifying.: They most certainly will try. But I'm confident that we will be able to keep them from gaining much. With your godfather and several other supporters, we still hold the majority in the Wizengamot on this matter. I certainly hope to spin it in a way that will paint Fenrir as the bad guy here, and his attacks as a desperate attempt to drive a wedge between law-abiding wizards and witches infected with lycanthropy and our community.:

Harry nodded, rubbing his eyes tiredly with his free hand. It was probably already terribly early. ..I need to go to sleep if I hope to make it through classes tomorrow without dozing off.:

..:Just be ready for the horrible, sensationalist article the Daily Prophet most likely will print. And know that there will be an emergency Wizengamot meeting tomorrow. I will call again when I'm back home. Sleep well, son.: Marvolo nodded, Nagini hissed a farewell, and the mirror went blank. Without much pause, Harry placed the now blank mirror on his bedside table, before he slid between his sheets again, settling in comfortably to get some more sleep before he needed to get up and go to breakfast in the Great Hall.

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Wednesday, 6th of December

The next morning Harry was rather subdued on his way to breakfast, causing a few of his Slytherin friends to furrow their brows. But Harry didn't really notice. Deep in thought, he waited for this morning's edition of the Daily Prophet. After what Marvolo had told him last night, Harry wanted to know what approach the newspaper known for scandalizing everything was going to take on the attack.

"Harry, are you well?" Theo asked as they sat down at the Slytherin table and Harry ignored the perfectly fine roasted mushrooms in front of him.

Harry turned to his friend and gave a small frown. Smiling wasn't possible with all the worry occupying his thoughts. "I'm well, but I haven't slept much, and I fear there will be bad news in the paper." He rubbed over his eyes, as he really hadn't slept that well after he had been woken by Marvolo's mirror call.

"Bad news?" Draco asked, filling his plate with various pieces of fruit – apples and pears, mostly – before getting a piece of toast as well as some scrambled eggs. It clearly was an attempt to get him to explain more. And Harry assumed he could. Most of his Slytherin classmates had a subscription to the newspaper anyway, so they would get a copy in a few minutes and would read the sensational version.

So Harry decided it was pointless to keep it a secret, and most likely beneficial if he got his version out first. "Fenrir Greyback attacked the party at the Bones residence last night. Father called me on the mirror to inform me. As far as I know, there was no one injured by the werewolves. But judging by the way the Prophet tends to interpret stories to their liking, I expect that the news will sound much worse coming from them."

Harry watched as his friends blanched. And why shouldn't they? Their fathers had been there too. "He said that the werewolves didn't injure anyone. And I'm sure if someone's family had been sent to the hospital, or needed a Healer, their children would have been informed." He tried to give them
all a reassuring smile, but guessed it came out as more of a grimace.

They all looked up to the windows when the rustling of feathers heralded the arrival of the owls carrying the morning post. With apprehension Harry took the rolled up newspaper from the owl landing before him, before he gave a piece of bacon to Hedwig, who had come as well to greet her master. He was one of the last to open the tie, flinging the roll open so he could see the headline, but the change in tone and rise in volume of the chatter in the Great Hall already told him what he would see. The blazing headline of Werewolves savagely attack over a picture of red-stained snow and broken glass was enough of a hint at the horrible article everyone was reading at the moment.

With a sigh – he really didn't like the tendency to make everything sound worse to sell more papers – Harry started to read the drivel written by none other than Rita Skeeter. He needed to know what everyone else would have read about the attack, so he could try to counter the rumours. This was going to be a hard day.

ooOoo

The same newspaper found its way onto the breakfast table at Grimmauld Place, where Sirius was sipping his coffee and ignored the paper to reach for an envelope of heavy parchment with the official seal of the Wizengamot on it. Remus, who was sitting on the other side of the table, was still too tired to care what the newspaper said, and was listlessly eating his porridge, prepared by Kreacher, who was hovering in the background, ready to get anything his master would want to have.

Setting down his mug of heavenly coffee, Sirius broke the seal and got the letter out. When he saw the first few lines of the letter he muttered "Emergency meeting?" his brows climbing up his forehead. Why would they call an emergency meeting when there had been a party they all had to attend just the evening before? But further down the parchment the reason was made clear with blunt words.

"Remus," Sirius got his best friend's attention, "I think you should know that the scumbag Greyback attacked the Ministry party yesterday evening. I'll have to go to a Wizengamot meeting today. It sounds like there are some that want to tighten the laws again, maybe even put something like martial law into place to hunt down werewolves..." Sirius trailed off and frowned even deeper. That wasn't something he could allow, for Greyback to ruin everything for all those that had done nothing wrong, working hard to keep others safe from them every month. That was just unacceptable.

"You stay here, rest. I'll keep you informed, but now I need to take a shower." Remus nodded, catching one edge of the newspaper and dragging it over to him, so he could read what was written there. If Sirius didn't know that this was pretty standard, even with the wolfsbane potion, he would have been concerned with Remus' looking as if he hadn't slept in days. But it was normal, and Remus now only needed time to rest, sleep, and eat, nothing that Sirius could help with.

Sure his friend was safe here, Sirius – still in his pyjamas and a dressing gown – sprinted up to his room to take a shower, get into the right robes, and be ready for the meeting in time. His vote and voice were needed to keep the worst from happening.

ooOoo

At his friend's side, Marvolo walked into the chamber and into pandemonium. At least compared to the way everyone behaved on normal days, this was quite different. Everyone was on their feet, at least two screaming matches taking place between members of the Wizengamot, several Aurors
were present, trying to keep the peace. The Minister stood with Madame Bones and Lord Abbott near the entrance, obviously discussing something urgently.

"That looks like fun," Xerxes murmured, the sarcasm thick enough to walk on.

"They look like headless chickens running around without a sense of direction," Marvolo murmured back, his glamoured eyes sweeping the crowd to tally how the blocs probably would line up. All of his were already here, so there was a solid number of votes on his side. Dowager Longbottom was sitting on the stool in front of the Potter seat, talking with Sirius Black, so that was another three votes most likely in his favour. It still was somewhat odd to know that those two would vote with him on some topics. Not all – Black just was too stubborn for his own good – but regarding werewolf laws they did.

Lucius walked over to them, pale blue robes trailing behind him, he nodded to them both, as they were not only older but of higher status, and then turned so he could look over to the mass of people in fine robes emitting anxious energy. "Lord Slytherin, Lord Lestrange," he nodded, getting polite nods in return. "My wife sends her greetings. There isn't much time before the session will start, but several of the Department Heads seem to agree with Diggory – he is here for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, the Beast Division – that the attack was a reaction to the lowered strictness in the laws regarding werewolves. I heard that there have been many howlers already to the division in reaction to the article in the Prophet this morning."

Marvolo listened while watching the interaction of everyone present. What Lucius had to tell was nothing less than he had expected. Those opposed to granting rights to werewolves would try to use this backlash in their favour, to manipulate those reliant on the broader public for one thing or the other to vote along their lines. Even with Umbridge gone from the picture, they would have their work cut out for them.

A deep resounding gong called them all to attention, and they parted ways to walk to their respective seats. It was only a short distance to the Slytherin seat, and after casting a cushioning charm – it looked to be a long session – Marvolo sat down, waiting patiently for all the others to settle down.

Once everyone was seated the Chief Warlock stood, banged his gavel on the flat stone placed before him for exactly this purpose, and called, "This emergency session of the Wizengamot on the 6th of December 1995 shall begin now. You all were called here to discuss the happenings of yesterday evening. Madame Bones shall give us all a report on the information known to us at the moment." With a gracious nod of his head, the old man gave the floor to Madame Bones, who looked paler than usual even in her plum-coloured robes.

"Thank you, Chief Warlock. Yesterday on the night of the full moon, several werewolves attacked the party held at the Bones residence. They were acting with forethought, sneaking onto the grounds, outside the gardens used for the party, before nightfall and moonrise. A total number of five werewolves were killed. Two were captured, and are currently being interrogated. The number of attackers is undetermined as the testimony was contradictory. A total of twenty guests were injured, but mostly by wild spells and broken glass. No one was infected with lycanthropy." Her voice was clinical, stating the facts, not embellishing anything and making sure that the fact the party had been at her house didn't influence her report.

Marvolo nodded in approval. Her professionalism was something he greatly admired. But he feared that these facts would do little to appease the panicking public, or the fear-mongers eager to gain influence through any means.
Diggory spoke next, obviously eager to get the permission to speak, he almost jumped to his feet and repeated what he already had said the evening before. "I ask you all, what changed? There hasn't been this big an attack in years, if not longer! But now they act! Now they attack! What other reason could there be than the much more relaxed laws? We from the Beast Division call for a hunt on all werewolves! Let's catch them all, eliminate the problem at its roots!" Marvolo was sure Diggory would have rambled on and on, his arms underlining his points with strong gestures, if the Chief Warlock hadn't called a halt to the man's words. Giving the floor to another.

"Lord Black, you may speak." Nods were exchanged, and Black stood, his robes tailored more along the lines of a duelling robe than the wider, more flowing robes traditionally worn to sessions in the Wizengamot. He probably was aiming for intimidation, and to remind everyone that he once had been an Auror, had fighting experience. Not the most idiotic choice to make as a young member for a violence-related emergency session.

"My Lords and Ladies, you are aware that this argument is purely happenstance?" the air quotes around the word "argument" were almost visible, but Marvolo wasn't convinced that it was the best idea to be so clearly condescending towards the other members, they likely would react in opposition to everything if they felt mocked. "This attack could have been planned for years, months. At the moment we don't know their reasoning. It would be hasty to take action against all wizards and witches infected with lycanthropy, because a few have attacked a party, failing to infect anyone."

The words that followed were more of the same. From what he had heard about the oldest son of the main Black family, Marvolo never would have guessed that he would be the voice of reason in such a setting. But here he was, valiantly arguing to wait for more information, for the interrogation to end, before taking action. Because once they started to prosecute all werewolves regardless of their involvement in anything illegal, there was no way back.

It didn't take long for arguments to start to repeat themselves. Those falling in line with Diggory's extreme view, called for extermination, or at least imprisonment of werewolves, because it was so obvious that they were dangerous, needed to be kept cowed, or better yet, removed. Those standing with Marvolo and Black on this, argued that they should hunt those down that had actually committed the attack. "Let's gather memory copies of those that had been at the party, get pictures of those wolves. Determine how many were male, how many female, if there are any identifying features. There is more evidence to be had, why should we ignore that?" Dowager Longbottom made a good point, but there were many Lords and Ladies reluctant to agree to a gathering of memories.

Were they afraid of being outed as one of those running, hiding behind tables? Most of them probably were, there hadn't been that many participants in the fights that hadn't been Aurors. Either way, her suggestion was shot down, and as there was no way to force someone to provide a memory copy for testimony – it was actually explicitly excluded as a form of evidence that could be demanded in the laws – they quickly moved on.

Marvolo watched and contemplated. He could maybe sway the whole situation in his favour, if he testified about his knowledge of Fenrir and his goals. After all, he had once known him well. But admitting that he still remembered so much before this big an audience was a risk, if he didn't get everything right. But if he managed… in the end the decision was made for him when they neared a vote over the generalized hunt for werewolves and it looked like the number of members going to vote for this hunt was greater than the number of those opposed to this nonsense.

He held his hand, wand lighted with a silent *lumos*, high in the air requesting his turn to address the Wizengamot. A moment later the Chief Warlock called out. "Lord Slytherin, you may speak."
Hesitating a little – he needed to portray reluctance – Marvolo stood, noxing the light on his wand as silently as he had cast the lumos. "Thank you, Chief Warlock." He turned so he could speak more directly to Madame Bones and the Minister, as if he were trying to blank out the bigger audience listening to his every word. "I feel that I have important information to add to this discussion before we come to a decision and vote." He took a deep breath as if to steady himself before he continued with what he wanted to say. "I remember more of the past which I wish to leave behind me, than I would like. Part of those memories are the motivations and plans of one Fenrir Greyback." A wave of murmurs went through the hall, Lords and Ladies turning to those sitting close to them, but Marvolo ignored them all. He needed to be convincing, needed to play his part well.

Another deep breath before he continued, giving the others time to calm down. "He wants to establish a werewolf society, overthrowing us magicals. He sees us as weak, werewolves as superior." That brought quite a few outraged shouts, which he also ignored. "He uses the fact that someone infected can't be a part of our society to gather them, bind them to him, make them loyal. Our changes to the harsh laws, giving hope to those wishing to lead law-abiding lives, are a threat to his plans. They diminish the grounds he builds on. Of course he would take action to counter our efforts!" That last Marvolo almost shouted, straightening his spine to appear sure of this, of himself.

"The Aurors and guests have managed to beat the attack back, and until the next full moon there is time to catch those responsible for this attack. I agree that we must take action, but we must hunt those that are a threat. Concentrate our efforts on the true danger, Fenrir Greyback! Not let ourselves be distracted by the easier-to-catch, but comparatively harmless targets, those werewolves living as normal a life as they can manage. Let's hunt for Greyback, he is the real problem here."

A few people really applauded after this passionate speech. More passionate than Marvolo had intended when he had started. But maybe he had swayed enough votes in favour of his suggestion to make sure the Ministry would not come knocking at every known and suspected peaceful werewolf in Britain.

Another hour later the Chief Warlock finally called for a vote. "Raise your wands when the action you want to see enacted is called out." The assistants readied their quills to take note of the way the Wizengamot would vote. "Who wants to see the proposal of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, Beast Division, to round up all werewolves to deport, imprison, or put them down, enacted?"

Forcing himself not to look around, Marvolo waited, and was relieved to see that fewer people had voted for this proposal than he had feared, when the assistant cast a golden number into the air above his head.

Next Lord Abbott called out for those wanting to see Marvolo's own proposal to hunt for Fenrir and his pack – relying on his memories of likely hunting grounds and hiding places – which got more votes than the proposal made by Diggory. Marvolo felt better instantly, but managed to keep his relief from his face. They had managed to contain the damage intended by Greyback.

That there were ten Lords and Ladies, who wanted to wait for more information before committing to a course of action, and no abstains, wasn't really important after that. Madame Bones came over to him the moment the session had been dismissed by the Chief Warlock. "Do you have any prior engagements hindering you from accompanying me to the Auror Headquarters right this minute, Lord Slytherin?" The woman spoke with clear determination, making an impressive figure even after this long day, sitting about, listening to old men bickering.
"I have nowhere to be right this moment. Lead the way, Madame Bones." With a shallow bow from his hip, Marvolo gestured with a sweep of his arm for her to precede him, implying that he would follow right behind her. If he gave the Aurors all the information he had, and that his Death Eaters had gathered in the last weeks since the first attack, they might be able to track them down quickly.

oooOo00oo

Albus walked at a leisurely pace down from his office and quarters late on Wednesday afternoon. He rather would be at the Wizengamot meeting Elphias had sent him an owl about. But as he was no longer the Potter Regent or the Chief Warlock, he wasn't invited to attend. Maybe it would be enough when his old friend came over after the meeting to give him an accounting. It was highly likely that they would vote for the werewolves to be more strongly persecuted again after all the havoc Greyback had wrought. It would enable him to appear as a benevolent and helpful advocate of their rights if the vote went as he expected. Intervening on the behalf of those who might be useful to him would sway them in his favour. Just as the Lupin family had been in his debt for the admittance of their son to the school. It was handy to have people grateful to you.

Not being able to be at the Wizengamot meeting gave him the opportunity to meet with his brother, though. And with Hagrid. He had thought long about it, and had come to the conclusion those two might be the best for a budding plan he was working on. It was obvious that Tom was slowly working on that poor boy, Harry, to turn him around and away from his true friends and the right values.

They just had to get him away from that man.

His walk down from the school to the village and through it to his brother's pub was an uneventful one. The weather wasn't particularly nice, but rather dark and dreary with a persistent drizzle of almost frozen rain falling down on Albus' bright orange robes. He preferred bright robes during the bleak months of winter.

When he stepped into the Hog's Head – Aberforth really should clean the windows, there was barely any light coming through – Hagrid was already there, sitting at a table in a corner, a big tankard in front of him.

Albus sauntered over, smiling genially. "Hagrid! How nice that you are already here."

"Headmaster," the half-giant greeted back, a broad smile making his thick beard twitch, "Aberforth said to go up to the private room at the back of the hall to the left. He'll be there shortly, y'see?"

"So lead the way then, my friend. I will follow behind you." With a hand Albus indicated that Hagrid should go up the stairs first, and the big groundskeeper did so, carrying his tankard in one hand, dwarfing it.

They sat down in the room Aberforth had assigned to them, making idle conversation about the goings on in the Forbidden Forest until the door opened to admit a disgruntled-looking wizard with his sleeves pushed up his arms, his grey beard not as neatly trimmed as Albus kept his.

"What do you want to talk about, Albus? And make it quick, I have guests down in the Inn, and I do have to work for my income. So get on with it!" With a huff he sat down in a chair near the door, impatiently looking at his older brother, and Hagrid sitting on a big cushion on the floor.

"I have asked you here because I need your help with something important for the good of our world," Albus started with a carefully conspiratorial voice. He needed to convince Hagrid and at
The same time keep his brother from leaving in a huff because he was acting too overtly suspicious. "You both know that Lord Slytherin is a most dangerous wizard, and certainly up to no good. He never had any interest in bettering our society, only his own gain on his mind. As long as he has young Harry in his grasp, though, we won't be able to oust him from his wrongfully captured seat and position. So I propose that we prevent Harry from returning to the deceiving Tom at the start of the holidays." Albus aimed for an important face to go with this – in his eyes – valuable plan, but had trouble maintaining the expression when his gaze fell on his small audience.

Hagrid looked like he had seen a Grimm, clearly shocked, and Aberforth even was shaking his head at his older brother. "Albus, clearly you can't think that would work! What do you intend to do? Put the lad under the Imperius curse? Dose him with recreational potions to make him dependent on you providing them? And how will you keep the Aurors off your trail? You can't assume the lad's adoptive father would let his disappearance just go?"

With great effort Albus managed to keep an interested mask up in the face of his brother's accusations. He always had had a penchant for nitpicking plans, pointing out possible flaws without pausing to search for possible solutions to the problems he was exaggerating in the first place.

With great patience Albus started to explain his solutions to these seemingly existing issues. "I will of course make sure that Tom thinks Harry is on an extended visit with friends, or maybe his muggle relatives. And with your help, Hagrid," he turned to the groundskeeper, "I'm sure we can get Harry to leave his friends alone, to visit with you to be shown something of interest in the Forbidden Forest just before the train leaves for London."

Hagrid had placed the tankard – now empty – on the only table in the room, now wringing his hands nervously. "You certainly can't want me to betray his trust, Headmaster! Harry and I are friends! True, he didn't have much time this year, but it's his OWL year, that's a really busy one for the students! No, sir, please, I can't do that." Tears were rolling down from the normally smiling eyes into the thick brush of Hagrid's beard.

Before Albus could come up with a response to that, Aberforth interrupted him again, anger glinting in his blue eyes. "Are you finally going barmy, Albus? You can't seriously claim that's a good plan!" He shook his head again, clearly exasperated. "I will have no part in this harebrained scheme of yours! You hear me? And now leave, Albus. And don't darken my doorstep anytime soon." Then he turned towards the still confused Hagrid, and addressed him gruffly. "You are always welcome here. And don't get involved in that disaster of a plan if you can help it. Nothing good will come of it!" Without waiting for an answer or permission to leave from his older brother, Aberforth left the room, leaving the door open, clearly wanting them to leave.

Hagrid left quickly, mumbling something about needing to feed the thestrals in the forest, and wanting to search for more unicorn tail hairs, before making a beeline to the door, trying and failing to look small.

Albus was unhappy with the way things had gone. He had rather hoped that those two would know what a danger Tom still was and that removing Harry from the man was the best way to shift the odds in their favour. If he didn't manage something very soon, it might become necessary to kill the boy himself after all. With the horcrux most likely lodged in the boy, there was no way around that. His vague hope that Tom's doing the deed himself might keep the boy safe wasn't worth sacrificing all hope for.

A much gloomier Headmaster returned to his office, walking to stand next to the window Fawkes was sitting next to. Why had Tom chosen such an unlikely path? And how did it happen that he had
been unable to see this possible path? At dinner that evening the seat at the middle of the teacher's table stayed empty, to the curious glances between the professors.

oooOOooo

Close to nightfall, the no-longer-full moon hidden behind the rain-bearing clouds, a few people woke on the floor of an abandoned hunting cabin. They were naked, their bodies covered in scars, hair and beards long and unkempt. One after the other they staggered over to a heap of old and badly mended clothes, picking through them all to find their trousers, shirts, socks, and shoes.

The biggest man among them, with teeth filed to a point, long, yellow-tinted fingernails, and grey matted hair, appeared to be unhappy with something, a snarl on his face, as he was dressing himself for warmth. Fenrir was as unhappy as he looked. When he had first woken after the last night and the transformation, he had counted his pack. They were several wolves short. That could only mean one thing: they had lost members of their pack, more than he had planned for, in the attack they had started on that forsaken party.

"Jeb!" he growled, yanking a sweater riddled with holes over his head. "Why didn't you know that there would be so many Aurors? It was your job to get us all the information we needed! You failed, Jeb, you failed!"

The other man looked frightened enough, looking around their normal place to change during the colder nights of the year. When not in their wolf forms, they needed clothes, and leaving them somewhere outside could get them wet, or even missing, so they always searched out an old house, shack, or similar, to leave the loathed but needed objects of human culture within.

"Get me a newspaper! One from today! Now!" he roared the last as Jeb still hesitated. While the young boy – Fenrir had taken him when he had been nine – scrambled from the cabin to do as he was commanded, Fenrir strode purposefully out of the room where the others still sorted out who would be wearing what. Maybe the fact that he hadn't been able to get his teeth into at least one wizard or witch wasn't as big a problem as he feared. True, he had wanted to infect a few Ministry people, but the first goal had been to make them fear wolves again, so they would stop making them a part of their weak way of life. That was the most important part. No wolf should be able to choose something other than living with his pack, strengthening his army to overthrow the weak humans. They only had the upper hand because there were so many of them, but he would change that.

Oh yes, he would.

He paced, as always full of energy after a full moon, until Jeb came back, bringing with him a torn and muddy edition of the Daily Prophet. After Fenrir had slowly worked his way through the article on the front page, he was grinning, showing his teeth. It looked like his most important goal would be met. They were feared again.

oooOOooo

Corban Yaxley was feeling much better today. Getting tortured by the Dark Lord – the man still was the Dark Lord even when Corban was sure something wasn't right with him – hadn't been the problem. What had made Corban doubt his Lord – or rather the man's methods – was the way he had been lecturing over the Yaxley family's history. Parading all the Squibs born into the family out for Corban to see, the poor performance at school, the trouble with casting magic often exhibited by members of the family. And the Dark Lord had claimed those were the results of inbreeding. What a lot of hogwash. Every sensible pureblood knew that mudbloods were stealing the magic from respectable families, robbing them of their rightful might, their potential, to claim...
what wasn't theirs, causing Squibs in the first place.

Those ridiculous claims that the shameful Squibs cast out were the reason that mudbloods were born at all, had only been another proof that that snivelling idiot of a wizard Pettigrew had botched the resurrection ritual. But Corban knew he had it in him to set everything to rights. Help the Dark Lord become what he was meant to be once again.

In his best casual robes he walked into the private room in one of the clubs down Knockturn Alley that was frequented by those without the money to buy themselves positions in the Ministry. But here one could find the wizards, young and old, who held true to the old traditions despite their lack of wealth, which made it easy for the likes of Malfoy or Nott to gain positions of power and buy themselves free of the silly punishments the Ministry enforced for even more useless laws to protect muggles.

When he stepped through a curtain, everyone fell silent. There they were, the young men he hoped to recruit to his cause, his mission to get their Dark Lord back the way he used to be. Their champion to get back into the ruling position in this world. Where they all belonged.

"Good evening, my young gentlemen," he said to them with a little evil smirk.

A young wizard – maybe in his early twenties – with red hair turned in his seat, gave Corban an assessing look, and then narrowed his eyes. "What do you want here?" If Corban wasn't mistaken, this was one of the Carrow family. Maybe a nephew of the twins? The sneer on the boy's face looked remarkably like the one Alecto often wore.

"Father! This is just a nice evening between friends." Of course his son was here. That was the reason he knew of this meeting in the first place. There was worry in his boy's eyes, and the way they were talking in here just moments ago, it was understandable that they were worried.

"I know, son. And I share your concerns. So no need to worry. The laws prohibiting the hunt on muggles are a disgrace. But just trying to change them now will hardly work." With a few more steps Corban was close to an empty seat near the middle of the small dirty room, which he took, placing himself in the centre of these young men, disillusioned with the life they were forced to live due to the Ministry's errors and banishing of old, valued traditions. "The Dark Lord is intent on raising the number of wizards and witches, where it has been reduced by a war and the Ministry's shunning of tradition." The way the Dark Lord was going about this wasn't the best – of that Corban was sure – but the idea was right. They were too few to really take on another war. "I speak of the tradition of mistresses. Kept women. It was the norm for the Head of the household, for every adult wizard with the means to keep them, to have a kept woman, to work in the house and to have more children. A half-blood or a mudblood, or muggle, if she was pretty. I'm here to get your help in starting this tradition anew." And just with these few words he had the attention of everyone.

He started to explain his plan – or rather the parts this youngsters needed to know – to them, outlining the actions they were to take in the next weeks. They would need safe places to keep the women. They would need to find them, healthy, good-looking women that at best wouldn't be missed. And if they managed to be careful enough, they soon would have a lot of magical children they could raise with the right values.

"Of course, those half-bloods will not be part of the families. But the sons will be passable soldiers, and the daughters will give birth to another generation of magical children. And just another generation later, there will be children worthy to be included in the pure families we want to preserve." It was a long game, but it was what the Dark Lord truly wanted. More magical children. And no need to let men have children together, or to include mudbloods raised with muggle values.
in their society.

Chapter End Notes

I hope the fight managed to be good. Fyreheart pointed out that with that many Aurors in attendance, it shouldn't be too difficult to beat the werewolves back, and I agree. So something to consider if you think it was too short ;)

I feel I should clarify that I do not agree with any of the misogynistic and racist statements of Corban Yaxley in this last scene. He is an all-around bigot only out to increase his own feeling of importance and power through pushing others down. But I hope that was evident enough with what I wrote ;)

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Thursday, 7th of December

After lessons had been over for the day, Harry had fetched his drawing supplies from his room down in the dungeons and walked out onto the grounds. It had taken some time, but finally he had found a spot from which he had a really nice view of Hogwarts and the lake. Now he was drawing a rough sketch as a base to create a painting of the castle. Harry had thought long and hard on what to get his guardian for Christmas and the man’s birthday. He had decided to find some interesting book for Christmas – he was debating if *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, or *The Prince* by Machiavelli would be the more fitting – as he didn’t really know if Marvolo did celebrate that holiday. For the man’s birthday, the much more important occasion to give a gift in Harry’s eyes, he wanted to give him a painting of Hogwarts he had made himself. His impression from the few times Dudley had given something to his parents had been that parents always were happy to get something their children had made with their own hands. As he really had limited experience, and the painting of a big pile of snakes had been a success, he had decided to repeat that on a larger scale.

Erasing one of the towers for a third time – it had looked somewhat wrong each time he had drawn it – Harry looked up to see someone walking towards him, holding a wand lighted with a lumos in front of them. Concentration shifting back to a fourth attempt to get that pesky tower to look right, Harry ignored the figure getting closer and closer, for the moment. Since his move to the Slytherin dungeons, he had felt a lot safer than before.

He had just started to erase his fourth attempt as well, when the person stopped next to him, slightly panting. “Harry, here you are! It wasn’t easy finding you!” Hermione said, out of breath, tucking her hat down over her bushy hair, fumbling because her hands were safely encased in knitted mittens.

“How that you’ve found me, what can I do for you, Hermione?” Harry asked, squinting up at the castle. Maybe he had the perspective wrong?

Harry heard a huff from his side but continued to study the castle in front of him. There had to be a way to draw that tower and make it look good.

“I wanted to see if you would be willing to study with me. I’m really interested in comparing your way of writing the potions instructions to those that are in our books. I’m having trouble to understand what’s in them that helps you to brew better. I never had trouble with the way our books present the instructions.” She sounded irritated, probably because Harry seemed as if he wasn’t paying her any attention.
“I can lend you some of my notes, so you can compare and come up with some questions you want me to answer. At the moment, I have to finish this sketch. There isn’t much time until the holidays, after all, and I need to get this finished in time.” Maybe getting more of the area surrounding the difficult tower finished would help with getting it to look right?

“I suppose that could work.” Now his friend sounded reluctant. “But it really would be easier to get down to the helpful differences if you were there from the start, Harry.”

A little annoyed, Harry turned to face Hermione. “I guess it could be quicker, but you can get to the bottom of this mystery after the holidays, or even after exams. You said so yourself, you have no trouble with the way the receipts are written in the textbook. But I have to have this finished before we leave the school for the holidays, so this here is of higher priority.” He shrugged seeing the war behind Hermione’s brown eyes. He knew well enough that there wasn’t anything much more important than studying and knowledge to Hermione, but her tendency to create plans and schedules to organize everything had given her a sense for prioritising things based on the date something needed to be finished.

“I guess you’re right. May I borrow your notes?” She didn’t sound really happy with this solution, but Harry was happy that she had accepted his reasoning.

“I’ll bring them up with me to dinner, if that works for you?” Harry asked, turning his attention for a moment in her direction.

She shrugged, rubbing her hands together. “I guess that’ll work. You coming back with me? It’s really cold out here!” Harry looked at his sketch and then at the castle. There was still that tower to draw, and a few bigger, important parts to mark, before he was truly finished with his work for today. But it was really cold and his feet were starting to feel the cold, too. His right hand, without gloves so he could draw at all, was cold as ice as well. But he wanted to finish this.

“I guess I’ll finish up here, with the Defence Club meeting tomorrow, there will be no time to finish up tomorrow, and the weekend is filled with study time and homework.” Here Harry gave his studious friend a pointed look, maybe making her blush. But as the cold had flushed her face a bright red already, it was hard to tell.

“See you at dinner then,” Hermione said, turned on her heel, and walked up the path she had come down, meeting with two tall figures making their way over to Harry.

It seemed he wouldn’t get as much quiet as he had hoped for.

Fred and George stopped right next to Harry, looking over his shoulder to see what he was doing. “Not bad!” was the comment from the twin on the right, while the one on the left nodded with a thoughtful look on his face. “Yeah, it’s clear what you have drawn there. Percy never managed to get his pictures of Penelope looking remotely like a human. That’s probably why he had them stashed away in the bottom drawer of his desk at home.”

Harry laughed at that picture. Poor Percy, chasing his two brothers, trying to get back his pictures, mortified that Penelope would see them and be affronted. It wasn’t nice of the twins to tease their brother with his lack of practice or talent – or both – but it was hard to be mad at them for long. And it was clear they never had done something like posting the pictures on the board in the common room, if they had, this wouldn’t be the first time Harry had heard about it.

“What do you two want?” Harry asked, starting another attempt to get that tower right.

“We have here,” they got out two satchels from beneath their cloaks, “assorted products from our
production. We have tested them, and worked out the last kinks. You, as our silent investor and Gryffindor inside of Slytherin, are the best to get them to the snakes so we can get a good picture of what they like and would buy. Would you do that, Harry?"

Harry gave them a raised eyebrow, they needed to be more specific before he would agree to anything. He still could remember vividly the picture of Dudley choking on his own tongue. No, agreeing to something the twins had thought out but were reluctant to explain was maybe as dumb as agreeing to a trade with a Slytherin without sorting out the terms beforehand.

“We want you to offer those products to the Slytherins for the prices marked on the outside of the packaging, and get them to answer the questions we have on the parchments in there somewhere. Give us the money and the filled in questionnaires afterwards, and we’ll be happy.” They gave him matching grins and wiggled their eyebrows, holding out the satchels to him.

So this was something like marketing research the twins were doing here. They had said as much at the beginning of term, that they planned to use this last year at Hogwarts to get a clear picture of what the normal Hogwarts student wanted from their joke products. It was only logical that the Slytherins were harder to approach than the other three Houses for two Gryffindors. Harry guessed it wasn’t a horribly terrible idea to offer the other Slytherins the opportunity to look at the merchandise. “If you accept accountability for all eventual trouble – bad reactions to some ingredients or the like – then I’m in. Help carry the stuff back to the castle?” Harry stuffed the pencil he had been using in one of his pockets, got out the glove for his right hand to slip it on, and closed his sketchbook, before he turned back towards the castle.

On the way back he asked the twins a lot of questions about their products and what they were planning to work on next. They had a lot of great ideas for future products and were already planning on how best to structure their shop, as well as how to disguise their products for owl order into Hogwarts. They expected to be on the banned items list rather quickly, much to Harry’s delight.

ooOoo

When Harry sat foot into the common room a little later, carrying two satchels and his drawing supplies, the room was packed with students. The atmosphere was quiet and studious, a few smaller groups playing games at the edges of the room, one group laughing about a story one of them was telling. All in all it looked like a typical late afternoon just before dinner would be served.

A glance around the room quickly showed Harry where he could find his classmates. The others were sitting near one of the fireplaces close to the entrances to the dorm corridors. Without missing a beat Harry walked over to them, carefully setting his newly acquired satchels on the ground.

“How is homework going?” Harry asked innocently, earning himself some very pointed glares. Goyle only grunted, carefully copying an essay from a messy draft onto a new scroll, while Theo pointedly closed his Defence book. “I know you wanted to take a walk outside, and looking at how red your face is you actually did do that, but that’s no reason to mock us. You will have to write that essay yourself.”

Harry sighed in defeat, there was no mistake, he would have to write that incredibly dull essay for Defence. But for the moment he had something to distract himself and everyone else, so he got out
the satchels.

“I have managed to get us all a discount for some of the prank products the Weasley twins have invented. Anyone interested in some Skiving Snackboxes to get out of a few lessons with our current excuse for a Defence Professor?” Harry felt that was a clever way to get the conversation over to where he wanted it to go. Obvious – as looks from Theo and Draco confirmed – but welcome, so the Slytherins rolled their eyes at him but were amused.

“A discount you say?” Draco asked, opening one of the satchels and spreading out the boxes from within to look at them and the descriptions on the outside of the packages. They all were eye-wateringly bright. The others at the table quickly removed their homework from the table, grabbing for a box or two, thankful for the distraction, and curious to boot.

“Yes. They want to know the average Slytherin student’s opinion on their products. So, for you to have an opinion on their products you need to be able to test them before answering any questions. They asked me to help with that.” Harry snatched up a thick roll of parchment tied of with a red ribbon. As he had suspected he discovered upon opening the scroll that these were the sheets with questions.

“I wonder,” Daphne started, turning a box of Extendable-Ears over in her hands, “where they get the money from to fund all their research. They clearly have made an investment here. And say what you will, the salary of a Ministry Employee isn’t big enough to support that big a family and make risky investments.” The girl wasn’t looking at Harry directly, but he just knew she was asking him.

A look around the table showed that Draco and Theo, as well as Millicent and Pansy, agreed with Daphne’s assessment. So they probably had had some form of education on things like the financial management of an estate and all that entailed.

“I know they have an investor who wants to remain anonymous. Their mother doesn’t approve – it’s just no proper job in her eyes – so I understand their caution,” Harry offered as the only explanation he was going to give, not stating clearly that he had been the one to invest in their business, but admitting to it nonetheless. It was funny how Slytherin talk worked sometimes. Or maybe it should be named politician talk instead. In Harry’s – admittedly limited – experience, all politicians talked that way, regardless from which House they were.

“What does this do?” Crabbe asked holding up a tube of canary cream decorated with bright yellow feathers moving over the surface.

“I guess you might have seen that one before. It turns the one eating something with it in it into a big canary. The feathers fall out one after the other, and once they’re all gone, you turn back. I know a few times someone used it in the Great Hall,” Harry explained, happy to collect the sickles Crabbe got out of his pocket and hand over a piece of parchment together with the change.

“If you use that on me, you’ll be in trouble!” Zabini said to Crabbe with more than a little fervour in his voice.

“We’ll visit family over Yule. Last year a cousin hexed me as a prank. This will be great revenge.” Crabbe’s face was satisfied, and the boy left to store his newly purchased goods in his trunk.

It didn’t take long to attract a crowd with the Weasley merchandise. One of the older boys complained about the prices he had paid previously for a nosebleed nougat. “I guess you didn’t purchase it directly from the Weasley twins?” Harry asked and got a shake of a head and a scowl as an answer. “Then it's likely that it was sold and bought more than once before it came into your
hands, and someone made a profit out of it.” With grumbling acceptance the other handed over the money and accepted the box, along with a sheet of parchment filled with writing.

One of the first-year boys tossed a tube of canary cream back on the table, scoffing at his friend, “Who would like to sound like an animal? Howling like a werewolf? Why would you want to sound like one of those monsters? I think the Ministry should just kill them all and the problem would be solved,” before turning as if to vanish into the crowd surrounding the table.

Harry felt himself go very still at this casual dismissal of the humanity of werewolves. Without much of a thought Harry had extended his arm, his hand taking a firm grasp on the back of the boy’s robe, reaching his target with the thoughtless ease of the practiced seeker. “What did you say?” His voice was almost a growl, the small boy turning as far as he was able, his face pale and his eyes wide. “Did you just state it would be a good idea to just round up and kill a group of witches and wizards to just kill them? Regardless of if they had violated any laws or not? Without a trial? Or are my ears tricking me?”

Harry didn’t really register the awkward angle the boy had to hold his head with that much of his robe clutched in Harry’s hand, but he registered all the eyes that were on him, the silence around them, the rising tension.

“Yeah, that’s what I said! You’ve got a problem with that? They’re all dangerous beasts. My parents say they’re better off dead anyway!” Either the little Slytherin had argued with the Hat just as Harry had done the evening of his Sorting, or he hadn’t yet learned any subtlety at all. It was also possible he was ambitious and not cunning. At all. Because saying such a thing when at a clear disadvantage wasn’t the smartest thing to do.

“You already learnt Wingardium Leviosa? The levitation charm? You know, a friend of mine knocked out a troll using that charm, back when we were first-years. So you can be dangerous too. Each of us can be. Do you think we should all be killed, just because there are some choosing to do evil? Harm others? No?” The boy was now rapidly shaking his head, clearly afraid of Harry.

That was what finally penetrated the anger that had gripped Harry. He was terrified of himself. Had he just grabbed an eleven-year-old kid? Almost shaking him, yelling at him?

Yes he had. Suddenly he felt sick to his stomach. Carefully he loosened his grip, making sure the boy stayed upright. He took a deep breath to centre himself, and get more distance between himself and his anger. This reaction had been overly dramatic. But his anger hadn’t been unfounded. Had it? No, casually suggesting a large number of humans should be killed wasn’t something you just let stand.

“You should think more about what you say, and not just parrot back what someone else told you,” Harry said, now a lot calmer. But the churning feeling in his stomach was still there.

Ignoring the first-year now scurrying away, he turned to the other fifth-years, seeing curious and careful expressions aimed his way. “Draco can you take over the distribution? I have to collect something from my room before we go up for dinner.” After he had received a small nod from the blond, Harry hurried away to the safety of his own room.

He was horrified over his own reaction. He didn’t want to be a bully. He hated bullies! Where had that come from?

ooOoo
Theo was on the move the moment his silent conversation with Draco and Daphne was finished. They all had seen the horror in their friend’s eyes. He had been terrified by his own reaction.

It had been unexpected, so Theo supposed he could understand the surprise, and considering how… mild and non-confrontational Harry seemed to be most of the time – even with his snark and sarcasm shining through with increasing frequency – the violent reaction seemed a little out of character for the new Slytherin.

Speeding up after he was out of sight, Theo managed to reach Harry at the door to his room before the other could properly close it. “Come on, let me in. You look like you can use a friend.” Obviously hearing the steel in Theo’s voice, Harry let his hand fall from the door, walking over to his desk, starting to rummage around some drawers.

Because he had another priority at the moment, Theo only allowed himself a brief look around the room. It was quite similar to the normal dorm rooms, if a bit bigger and more orderly than the room he had to share with not only Draco and Blaise, but Vince and Greg as well. The last two weren’t the most orderly people.

“What the kid said wasn’t right. He not only contradicted Lord Slytherin’s politics in public where you could hear him. He also casually demanded the death of innocent, if occasionally dangerous, people.” Theo walked over the really nice rug over to the bed and sat down at the edge. “Don’t beat yourself up over this. Maybe you overreacted. But you caught yourself. No one came to harm. Maybe he’ll learn to think before opening his mouth and parroting what he's heard somewhere. At least he'll learn to keep his mouth shut until he knows how the wind is blowing where he is at the moment.”

Harry made a face at that, making Theo smirk. Of course the Gryffindor sensibilities would object to the fact that you could think whatever you well pleased, as long as you knew when and where to speak your mind and when to keep quiet.

“Come on, let’s get up to dinner, and after let’s play a game of chess. You need to practice if you want to get better.”

Harry rolled his eyes at Theo for that obvious attempt to change the topic, but he smiled. “Thanks for trying to cheer me up. Let’s go. Will you help with the younger years tomorrow in the Defence Club meeting? I think we should improvise a session on how to use prank charms any first year would know to get away from a dangerous person.”

Glad that his friend didn’t seem inclined to brood over the incident, Theo happily agreed. Making sure the younger kids knew how to defend themselves adequately was a good goal. Reinforcing the lesson Harry had taught this evening was a nice side effect.

After a long day teaching classes, and an evening spent grading essays with Sonja reading a potions magazine next to him, Severus was on his way to the hospital wing. He had a basket of finished potions to deliver. The days since his visit to his ancestral home – his own manor now – had been busy ones. He had instructed the elves in what he wanted them to do, which rooms to make
habitable first, how he wanted the potions garden planted, and other things along those lines.

He had taken Sonja to visit, and they both had admired the potions laboratories – yes, several laboratories – in the basement. At the moment they were debating on whether Severus should sell the house his parents had left him. And about the robes they would need to have made for the events they would have to attend after officially claiming his new title. She thought it would be best to go to one of the tailors in Diagon Alley, Severus would prefer to have one of the elves make them for him. Honey had said she was proficient in sewing. Sonja was sceptical.

Severus stepped through the doors to the infirmary, seeing that all the beds were empty, but there was light still on in Madame Pomfrey's office. With a few more steps, phials softly tinkling in the basket as they moved against each other, Severus came close enough to the door that he could hear two voices behind it, arguing. Out of habit, Severus’ steps got lighter, more careful, so he wouldn’t make as much noise.

When he recognized the voice of Aberforth Dumbledore, he cast a spell on himself to make sure his steps, clothes, and the basket he was carrying wouldn’t make a sound. This was too good an opportunity to waste.

“That can’t be right. Truly, you must be mistaken.” The medi-witch sounded distressed, as if she wished whatever she had been told was a lie. A fire was burning, the scent of burning wood and the sounds of flames didn’t leave a doubt. Maybe a floo call?

“I know what I have seen.” There were stubborn undertones in the younger Dumbledore’s voice. “And I don’t claim to be right, that’s why I’m asking you to check. He is acting strange. Making plans to keep a student from their guardian. I think he’s losing it. There’s only one other explanation, and I hope that’s not the reason. I rather would believe he’s getting old enough to lose his marbles. So please, the next time he’s in range of your wand, cast a diagnostic and test for dementia.” At the end, the owner of the most shady pub in Hogsmeade was demanding that Pomfrey should just do as he said.

While the two inside the office – Dumbledore most likely by floo call in the fireplace – were debating over technicalities, Severus mulled over the few words he had overheard. The Headmaster was planning to abduct a student? There was practically no way the student in questions wasn’t his Lord’s son, the boy he was sworn to protect. Who else could be a target? One of the Death Eater’s children? It was unlikely the Headmaster would try to capture one of those kids.

After several moments the discussion inside the office slowly was moving to an end. Severus moved back to the entrance, removed the spell keeping his level of noise down, before he walked back towards the office, making more noise than he normally would. When he was back, knocking on the office door, he heard the last words of farewell between the school medi-witch and the Headmaster’s brother, before the door opened.

“Good evening. I have here the new batches of Pepper-Up potion, sleeping draught, calming draught, and stomach soother. Are there others you will need more of?” Long practice enabled the Potions Master to look unconcerned and not show any of his inner planning and scheming to the witch accepting the basket from him.

“I'll need more skin-cleaning solution soon. Some teenagers get up to some desperate measures over pimples.” She rolled her eyes, turning to place the basket on a table near her storage shelves.

“Please send me a list as soon as possible. I'll have to plan carefully to get everything brewed in time.” They wished each other a good night before Severus left, and Madame Pomfrey started to move the new potions into the spots she had designated for them.
On his way down to the dungeons, Severus laid out a plan for the rest of the night. He would need to inform his Lord as soon as he could, without drawing undue attention from the Headmaster or any of the man’s spies. It was impossible to leave the castle without being spotted by at least a few portraits, or without alerting the Headmaster through the wards. At least Severus was pretty sure the wards were set to inform the Headmaster if a student or member of staff left the premises.

Maybe his best bet would be to fake being summoned. Deciding on this course of action, Severus chose a stretch of hallway with a lot of portraits to touch his arm, right over the mark, for a brief moment before accelerating his pace. Hopefully this would corroborate his claim once the Headmaster received the report from his spies on the walls.

Sonja was already in her nightgown, only wearing an open robe over it, when Severus set foot into their quarters. She looked questioningly when he only gave her a short kiss, before going for the wardrobe and the hidden compartment inside, where his Death Eater robes and mask were hidden. “You're being summoned?” She sounded sleepy and on edge at the same time.

“No, love. But I have something to report, so I will claim a summons as the reason for leaving the school. There is no need to worry.” He got his wand out, casting a patronus to inform the Headmaster he would leave, as was the established procedure between them.

“Then I'll take a book and will sit up reading. As I would do if you truly were called to a madman bent on destruction.” She gave him a small smirk, winking at him, while hiding a yawn behind one hand. Her ring reflecting the light from the candles and fireplace sent a pleasant feeling through Severus.

They exchanged another kiss, before Severus charmed both items he had retrieved from the wardrobe to shrink until they fit into his pocket. He wouldn’t actually don them, at least not until he returned to the school, so he would present the expected image for the Headmaster.

ooOoo

Marvolo was preparing a small room for Nagini’s use during the time she was to shed her current skin. As no elf would be able to understand her instructions, and she already was irritable enough, Marvolo was currently adjusting the humidity, number and position of stones, branches, and other natural objects, as well as the temperature, to Nagini’s specifications.

.:Now it’s to warm. Just a little colder. And that big stone over there should be like a stone right from out of the sun:.' she hissed impatiently, her eyes getting a milky colour, a clear indicator the big reptile was about to exchange her skin for one a little bit bigger so she could keep growing.

Not complaining, Marvolo cast a few more charms, making a big stone in one corner of the room self-heating so it would feel like a stone which had been in the sun for several hours. She was really moody shortly before she was about to shed her skin.

Suddenly Marvolo felt one of his followers calling for him through the Mark. That hadn’t happened at all since he had returned to a body. He wasn’t sure about the time he had been nothing more than a ghost. At the moment, he thought it most likely that not one of his Death Eaters had thought to summon him during that time.
I need to leave, Nagini. Please test the room, I will adjust what still isn’t the way you like it, once I’m back. Her hiss in answer to this information sounded displeased, but getting everything to a point where she would be satisfied could take hours still. So he cast a spell at the door, to keep the atmosphere inside the room separate from the rest of the house, before he went to get his robes and apparate over to Headquarters.

The moment Marvolo arrived in the big room used for meetings – the place he had been called to – the one waiting for him got down on one knee, dark robes pooling around him on the floor. It took only a short look for the Dark Lord to be sure that Severus had called for him. The fact that he had done so through the Mark was a reassurance. If there had been a problem with Henry, the man would have sent a patronus.

“Severus, rise. What is so urgent you have to inform me at this time of night?” It wasn’t all that late, but late enough that most sensible people who needed to get up in the morning would be headed for bed.

“I overheard a conversation I believe you need to know about, my Lord,” The still-kneeling man answered, his head still bowed. Marvolo rolled his eyes, sure the other wouldn’t be able to see it. In a way, this display of deference and submission was gratifying, but it also made things more complicated than they should be, making interactions between him and his followers a lengthy process.

“I said rise, Severus. And follow. It sounds like this will take some time, I’d rather sit for a longer talk.” Without waiting for Severus to do as he asked, expecting the man to hurry, Marvolo turned around and made his way over to his office in the house. He would take this opportunity to take a drink before he had to deal with an irate Nagini again.

Two tumblers were retrieved as well as a bottle of excellent muggle scotch before Severus arrived at the door, following Marvolo in with another bow. Following a silent command, given with the wave of a hand, Severus sat down in the chair reserved for visitors.

“What is it you want to report?” Marvolo asked, swirling the drink in its glass, marveling at its smooth colour and scent.

Severus took up his own glass, cradling it between his hands folded around the small container. “While delivering potions to the infirmary, I heard Madame Pomfrey talking to someone I think was Aberforth Dumbledore, about the man’s suspicion the Headmaster may be suffering from a decline in his mental health. He demanded the mediwitch test the Headmaster for dementia. The proof he provided was a plan hatched by the Headmaster to keep a student from his or her guardian. He wasn’t elaborating on the plan, but I think the most likely target for such a plan would be your son, my Lord.” Severus took a tentative sip from his drink, the Potions Master always was careful with spirits or wine around Marvolo. Probably a force of habit, because in the past his followers had needed their wits about them all the time they stayed in his presence.

“Do you think you will be able to get more details? My son carries reasonable protection against abduction with him at all times, but if the Headmaster really means it, my son could come to great harm before I can be there to get him to safety.” Suddenly his stomach made odd movements, churning, making Marvolo think of what might cause something like this. It wasn’t the first time something like this had happened. When he had been told his son had fallen down the stairs from his dorm, breaking several bones, he had felt something similar.

He was worried about another person coming to harm. It was disconcerting and reassuring at the same time. Reassuring because it was an indicator for his returning and still-improving humanity,
the harm undone that he had inflicted on himself. And disconcerting because such feelings could easily be exploited by others, and therefore presented a weakness. He would have to find ways to shield his weaknesses, because cutting away his human nature would harm his magic and mind again. Not an error he would repeat knowingly.

“It will not be an easy task. If he really asked his brother to assist with such a plan, he clearly doesn’t trust the members of his Order with this. And rightfully so, I would say. Those still standing staunchly by his side mostly aren’t inclined to do anything risky, or so obviously against the law. Those who would be willing to risk something like that, are no longer following the Headmaster blindly.” Severus paused to take another cautious sip. “I would hazard a guess that any attempt to abduct your son would happen only when he leaves the grounds of the school. Either during the last Hogsmeade visit, or with the start of the winter holidays, my Lord.”

Marvolo nodded in agreement. It was the most likely time to try something like this, because an abduction from school grounds would cause trouble for the Headmaster of the school, maybe even cast suspicion on the man. He would surely try to avoid that.

“Look for more information, but be careful not to compromise your position. I will make Henry aware of the potential problem.” Taking another sip himself, a little evil smirk settled on Marvolo’s face. “How is your wife? And have you already prepared everything to claim your seat on the Wizengamot properly?” Marvolo knew he was rattling the other's composure with that question. He knew that Severus wasn’t really looking forward to taking up the position in the spotlight he would get the moment he came to the Wizengamot chamber laying claim to the Prince seat.

“I have begun to get everything ready, my Lord. I’m still debating on the right robes to wear, and the right moment to announce my claim. I’m also still unsure if I should inform the Headmaster beforehand, or not.” Severus sounded reluctant, but relaxed a little more into his seat, assuming a position more fitted to a peer, an equal, not a follower or subservient.

“I guess you'll have to make the decision of whether informing the Headmaster beforehand is a good idea or not. But I can give you the planned agenda for the next regular meeting.” With a wave of his hand, Marvolo cast a silent accio for the sheet of parchment on which he had copied the agenda of the next Wizengamot meeting.

A small scroll zoomed over from a shelf near the door, landing in the outstretched hand of the Dark Lord before he flicked his hand again to banish it in Severus’ direction.

Fumbling a bit because he still held the small tumbler in both hands, Severus managed to catch the scroll before he set the remainder of his drink down on the desk in front of him. After he had unfurled the scroll and had scanned the agenda, Severus pulled a face of distaste, causing Marvolo to chuckle. “Be glad it isn’t the budgeting session. That one could be classified as torture. I would advise you to announce your claim during the open session to bring forward unexpected additions to the agenda at the start of the meeting, just after the section where the Minister informs about various things.”

A hand with long, pale fingers came up to pinch the bridge of Severus’ prominent nose. There was no way he could deny his family connection to the Prince family. “I feel like this will be the hardest order to follow you have ever given to me, my Lord. Dealing with all those dunderhead Gryffindor Lords and Ladies… What do you wish me to report to the Headmaster regarding the content of our meeting, my Lord?”

With those words the deferential posture was back again, Severus sitting at attention in his seat, head slightly lowered, small scroll vanishing inside one of his robe pockets. Marvolo leaned back with a small sigh. It was easier with Xerxes to be just himself, and not the Dark Lord. Maybe with
time this state could be reached with some of the younger followers as well.

“If you need advice on your robes, go with something in family colours, and maybe cut more along the lines of the robes you use in the laboratory, remind the others that you have a Mastery, have reached a respectable position under unfavourable conditions. So maybe traditional robes altered to include some of the typical features of brewing robes, such as sleeves that narrow down considerably towards the hands?” That Lucius fell almost too easily in a somewhat friendly relationship with Marvolo irked the man, but that Severus constantly slid back into a much more subservient role, always so cautious, not trusting his Lord even if he was willing to follow his every command, was somehow even more infuriating. Maybe Marvolo needed another meeting with Mrs. Goyle, as he obviously wasn’t going to get his feelings and reactions in order without professional help.

“I will take your advice under consideration, my Lord.” Severus bowed in his chair, not relenting on what he had asked for, an explanation about why he had been called.

Marvolo sighed again, this was frustrating and wouldn’t be solved by cursing the other man. “Give me a report on Henry’s progress in Potions, as well as an evaluation over the stance of the other Slytherins towards him. After that, I would like to know how your two potions experiments are developing. For the Two Fathers potion I might have another willing proband for you. He is currently in his last year at Hogwarts, but I guess he will not wait long after school to settle down.”

Severus started on his two reports on the spot, leaving Marvolo to listen to his Potions Master and wondering how he could manage to change the way they interacted to something he felt more comfortable with. It was over an hour later before Severus left to join his wife, and Marvolo apparated back to Griffin House to pander to Nagini’s irritated demands. Maybe he would find some time to work some more on his theory on how to move horcruxes between containers without harming either container or soul piece. It was a most frustrating puzzle to solve.

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Friday, 8th of December

It had been a long day for Harry. The way most of the younger years had looked at him in the common room and during meals, it was clear that they were spooked by the display they had seen the day before.

Theo’s attempt to make him feel better hadn’t dispelled all his doubts, but his friend’s attempt to help him had eased some of his worries. He hadn’t been angry about something stupid, petty. But about the casual dismissal of the value of human lives. He had over-reacted, but had managed to catch himself. At the moment, Harry planned to speak with Mrs. Goyle tomorrow to see what she thought about this.

But that was tomorrow. Today, or rather now in this moment, the next meeting of the Defence Club was about to start. Once again the Great Hall had been cleared for more floor space, and students from all Houses and years had assembled. Hermione was standing beside him, looking
over the crowd, a smug look on her face. She loved organizing these meetings and all the others listening attentively to explanations from her and Harry.

He had informed her the previous evening that they should change the next lesson to one on what damage was possible with first year spells and charms, and how it was important to be careful, as well as how creative use of them could help in a pinch. They had done similar exercises before. But all in all, it was important to keep practising.

“Hello, everyone!” Harry got the attention of all those present. “Thank you all for coming. Today we will practice shield charms and various little hexes. We all need to remember the damage that can be done even with spells that seem harmless if cast in the right – or wrong – situation. A tripping hex on someone near a ledge, or on stairs, can possibly even kill. So always be aware of the damage each of us is capable of!”

With the last Harry searched the room for the cluster of first-year Slytherins, wanting to impress on them that just because someone could cause a lot of harm was no reason to kill them.

Soon after that, Harry and Hermione walked down from the dais and out among the students, helping with explanations and demonstrations where needed.

After Harry had explained how a person under the influence of a Petrificus Totalus falling face first into a shallow puddle could easily drown before the spell wore off to the young Miss Smith and her friend – quite aware of the fact the boy from yesterday was only a few steps away – a voice he knew well tried to get his attention.

“Harry, can you help us? I think we have the pronunciation of the jelly-legs jinx wrong.”

He turned and came face to face with Cho Chang, the Ravenclaw seeker and the girl he had asked to the ball last year. Without success. It was a little embarrassing remembering his fumbling attempt to ask her out, and how long he had taken to even gather the courage to go up to her and ask.

“Can you show me?” he asked, trying his hardest to not blush. Cho was really pretty and still managed to make his stomach do funny things.

Cho and her friend – Harry thought her name was Edgecombe – turned to each other, Cho casting a stable Protego and her friend, with her reddish-blond hair in a messy bun, attempting to cast the jelly-legs jinx at her friend’s shield.

“No, your pronunciation is good. You’re making an extra twitch at the end of the wand movement. Look!” Harry got his own wand out, and not pointing at anyone, demonstrated the movement a few times, before he asked Cho’s friend to copy him.

After a few more tries, a light shot from Edgecombe’s wand towards Cho’s shield. “Thank you, Harry.” Cho started to say more, but Harry felt a hand on his arm and turned to see who was there.

“Hello, Harry! I have no partner to practice with.” It was Luna, standing there, a dreamy expression on her face, as if the fact that no one had been willing to work with her wasn’t all that bad. Remembering all the times he had been selected last for a team in a school sports lesson, or how the other children had stayed away from him because of Dudley and all the lies Harry’s aunt and uncle had told, he decided to do something about it. He might not be able to force others to accept the sometimes quirky Ravenclaw, but he could make sure that she had someone to practice with.
Not quite ignoring Cho’s further words of thanks, but dismissing them with a small nod, Harry walked together with Luna to a place where they could stand face to face a few feet apart. “I’ll start with a shield, and you can cast the first jinx,” he encouraged the girl across from him. At first he thought that she wasn’t paying any attention, which caused his shield to waver. He barely managed to get it back up before a yellow stinging hex would have crashed right into his face.

With Harry now no longer deceived by Luna's seemingly absent-minded state, they exchanged a few more simple so-called prank spells, before Hermione came over with Neville and Ron in tow. “I think Luna can practice with Ron and Neville for a while, Harry. You need to help me with explaining to the others.”

“You okay with that, Luna?” Harry wanted to know from his practice partner. She nodded, but Harry nonetheless was a little reluctant to leave her with his two friends. Explaining something as simple as the Protego to a sixth-year was embarrassing. More than one had objected to his explanation at the start of the Club. A few still did.

So it happened that Harry walked by a few seventh-years boys, with Defence as one of their NEWT courses, when one of them commented on a girl – a seventh-year as well, if Harry remembered correctly – which was practising different shields not too far away. “Those robes hide too much. Have you seen what she looks like only in a skirt and blouse?” There was something eager in their voices. Harry wasn’t all that sure this was how one was supposed to talk about a girl. “Oh yes! And her ass! Do you think I could get her to agree to come on a date this Hogsmeade weekend?”

Harry walked over to some of the younger students, trying to ignore the way the older boys had talked. He wasn’t here to help the NEWT students with their practising. Most of the time they just went over the spells they needed to know and be able to cast for their exams at the end of the year. A few helped out with explaining now and again. No, he was here to help those in OWL year or under, and a few others who hadn’t bothered taking Defence against the Dark Arts further after taking their OWL in the subject.

So Harry tried to do just that. But the rest of the lesson he had troubles concentrating. As soon as he came near one of the girls close to his age, he couldn’t help but notice things about them he until now mostly had ignored. He saw the way Hermione’s cardigan sat around her chest – she had discarded her robe some time before – and had to remember himself sternly that she was more like a sister to him. The way Ginny’s skirt swung around her legs, as she dodged a well-aimed powerful leg-locker curse thrown by one of the twins.

It was very distracting and mortifying. Some of the girls were almost strangers to him, Hermione and Ginny family, almost sisters. And then there was the warning from Marvolo in the back of his mind. That some families had strict expectations regarding dating and everything associated with it.

Harry did his best to ignore what suddenly caught his eye wherever he looked. Now he was happier than ever that Daphne had already asked him to be her date to those events they would be visiting together. Girls had been terrifying before, and Harry was sure that becoming a blubbery idiot staring at their chests wouldn’t make interacting with them any easier.

As if being adopted hadn’t been enough already, becoming an adult at the same time was just too much. Maybe he could get advise from an adult? He would have to think about that, because Sirius would be the easiest to talk to, but Harry very much doubted that he would also be the most helpful adult. Somehow it felt more like the man would tease Harry without mercy over Harry’s insecurities.

Turning to a pair of Hufflepuffs – he was pretty sure those were second-years – Harry banished all thoughts from his head that weren’t related to instructing, and concentrated on the club meeting.
The party he was headed to today – one in a list of many, many more – was to be held in a clearing somewhere in the woods. To make attending possible, the invitation was a portkey. His old Head of House had always been eccentric about everything. Some of the parties he had held for his selected few had been outright ridiculous. In a way, Marvolo was curious what was in store for them today.

But even more curious had been the fact he had been invited at all. With all the old professor knew about Marvolo’s time as a student, he would have guessed the man would be wary of him. But maybe all his work to get his reputation repaired had worked so well that he once more was someone Horace Slughorn wanted to have in his collection.

Unsure if this was a trap, possibly set by Albus Dumbledore, or a sign of his success in reintegrating himself with society, Marvolo checked his appearance a last time. He had selected trousers from a dark woollen cloth, a silk shirt with a silk vest – richly decorated with embroidery and glass beads – over which he would wear an open robe made of wool and lined with silk. He planned to apply ample warming charms if it proved to be necessary. A clearing in the middle of nowhere. It was a distinct possibility that he would need warm clothing to avoid having his teeth clattering together.

Reading the activation phrase from the bottom of the invitation out loud, Marvolo activated the portkey, and after a moment spent in the colourful disorientation that was portkey travel, he found himself on a nice carpet surrounded by floating lights. It took a moment, but then his eyes – glamoured again to hide their true colour – adjusted to the lighting situation, so Marvolo could properly take in his surroundings. Others were already there, and a young witch wrapped up in what looked like a Roman or ancient Greek costume in colours probably intended to look like ice and snow – there was too much glittering involved to be anything else – came up to him.

“Welcome, Lord Slytherin! Your host asked me to show you to him the moment you arrived. Please follow me!”

She seemed friendly enough and wouldn’t really pose a threat in such a public venue, so Marvolo didn’t object, but smiled a little polite greeting. “Lead the way, fair Lady.” Her delighted giggles were another proof that simple flattery could get you a long way with any human.

While following the young witch, Marvolo had time to take in the décor. Charmed ice was arranged in blocks to form small benches, tables, and a buffet off to one side. The light was provided by floating orbs and what looked like fairies that fluttered about. The ground was covered with a large number of carpets, leaving only small gaps to see snow through. It seemed parties out in the open were the thing done this season. Hopefully the next few parties would be held inside and near a nice, warm fire.

The host was surrounded by a number of younger celebrities. Or rather people who were called celebrities. A singer Marvolo thought he had seen on the front of the Daily Prophet once since his return, members of the Harpies Quidditch team, and someone who Marvolo suspected was the team’s manager.

“Welcome!” Horace Slughorn called out the moment he saw Marvolo stepping into the group surrounding his settee placed between two fires lit in bronze braziers. “How nice that you could make it, Lord Slytherin! I imagine you got way more invitations than you could accommodate,
didn’t you?” The man, quite a bit larger than in his time as Head of Slytherin House at Hogwarts, managed to get to his feet and held his hands out in front of him. To Marvolo’s immense relief, it was only to shake hands and not to hug him. That would have been simply too awkward to contemplate.

“My secretary had a lot of trouble balancing all the invitations that I got. But I have to commend his organizational talent, he managed to fit everyone in whom I insisted to visit.” Barty had truly made a great effort to make the plans work out, but this party had been on the maybe list, not the can’t-avoid-have-to-go list. Making Slughorn believe he had been one of those inviting him whom he really wanted to see, was beneficial in Marvolo’s eyes, so he let him believe it without speaking it out loud. Always tell the truth if you could, it was much better than lying, because it was easier to do and much harder to spot.

“Go around, meet a few people. You’ll find more than a few Ministry-related wizards and witches here. What I heard was, you haven’t had much time to get to know the current finest of magical Britain!” Slughorn clearly wanted to impress his acquaintances with the fact that he had managed to invite Lord Slytherin to his party, and curry favour with him by granting him the opportunity to meet more people who might be useful.

Connections were a currency Slughorn always had known how to invest and use to his advantage. And maybe he could use this party to find a few possible candidates to draw to his side of things. A quidditch star was influential with young wizards and witches, and the more simple-minded masses. They could open up ways to get his message out to those not inclined to read a book or think too hard.

“I’ll do that,” Marvolo agreed with a smile and a polite nod, provoking his old teacher to laugh jovially. Before the old man could say much more, he was drawn into a conversation with a witch dressed quite extraordinarily. It was possible she was a member of that popular musician group called the Weird Sisters, but Marvolo wasn’t sure. As he turned to see if there was someone he might be interested in speaking with, an arm snaked around his own, drawing him closer to a muscular, female body. Suppressing his first response – cursing whoever dared touch him without his consent – Marvolo turned to look at his assailant.

“Nice to meet you, Lord Slytherin. Or may I call you Marvolo?” Her voice was nice to listen to, and what he had felt to be a well-trained body, looked the same. Adding her nice dark and flawless skin to the other things he could see, she combined many traits in herself that most considered desirable. Or so he assumed by his observations and readings.

“I don’t even know your name, lovely Lady. Don’t you think calling me by my first name would be rushing things?” Marvolo tried to relax his posture and not tense up. He wanted to be charming here, gain possible allies, not alienate strangers. And she was possibly flirting with him.

She laughed and fluttered her eyelashes at him. Definitely flirting.

“My name is Gwenog. Gwenog Jones. I’m captain of the Holyhead Harpies.” Her smile was radiant. Marvolo was relatively sure she was interested in him. He didn’t feel the same.

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“Nice to meet you, Miss Jones. I heard your team is doing well this season. How is your training going?” Marvolo managed a nice conversation with her, subtly rebuking her flirting attempts clearly geared to get him to agree to a more short term involvement.

“I’m a single father of a teenaged boy. There are responsibilities that override a few things one
could consider pleasant self-indulgence.” He managed to pull off a convincing look of regret to go with that statement, making her back off, stating he was one of the more responsible adult males she had ever met. She gave him a peck to the cheek and promised to send him and his son tickets to one of her games that was to take place during the summer holidays.

After that conversational minefield, Marvolo retreated to a bar off to the side, to order himself one of the drinks, after he had noticed – with his lips curling in distaste – the fact there were no simple spirits or wines to chose from, only those mixed concoctions with much more fruits and sugar than he wanted to ingest. He needed a drink, so one of those sugar-infested, colourful things it had to be.

While watched a house elf shaking a clear container with a lid in the air above its head, a young wizard leaned against the bar next to Marvolo. “It’s hard dodging witches all the time, isn’t it? If you want, I can introduce you to my circle of friends for maybe more interesting company.” If he hadn’t been looking for subtle cues at all the parties he attended, he might have missed the wiggle of eyebrows or the quick wink. But he did watch for tells like these, so he did see.

Great. Another one interested in dragging him off to a secluded corner, or another private space.

“That is a generous offer. Mister...?” Marvolo let his question trail off. Maybe he should spend some time learning the faces and names of all the minor celebrities of wizarding Britain, and everyone involved with various businesses. It might make these parties a little easier.

“Oh! I’m Rolf Spudmore, related to the Spudmore family creating brooms over in Germany. I’m managing the subsidiary here in Britain. Nice to meet you, Lord Slytherin.” he extended a hand, while his other elbow remained firmly planted on the bar.

The elf set the drink down in front of Marvolo, levitating a straw, a small umbrella made from paper, and a charmed giant snowflake onto the glass rim to decorate the sweet-smelling drink.

Accepting the hand in a short shake, Marvolo cast a wandless detection charm on the glass. It was free of poisons, potions, or any other tampering. He took a cautious sip and made a face. It was sweet enough, but combined with the spirits in there, it was a little strange. Maybe he could get used to it over time. He took another sip before turning to the smiling young man at his side.

“Nice to meet you too, Mr. Spudmore.” Another sip to give him time to gather his thoughts. “I would really like to meet your friends. But what I said to Miss Jones is the same I will tell you. I’m a single father, and have a reputation to repair. Indulging in… some things that might be seen as… questionable in the public eye isn’t something I can risk at this point in time.”

This declaration didn’t cause the small smile to vanish from a classically beautiful face. Another person who usually would be called attractive. Was he attracted to the man? Marvolo wasn’t sure.

“Well, considering the… climate in good old Britain, and the expectations heaped upon us, we know how to be discreet. But there isn’t a need to rush.” After that the conversation changed to the current climate for the broom industry and what Henry felt about his current model – the Firebolt – and how it compared to the Nimbus he had had before. It felt like a safer topic, and while they talked, often joined by others who stayed only a short time, no other witches tried to catch Marvolo’s interest quite as boldly as Miss Jones had done.

It was a really tired Marvolo who returned home in the early hours of the morning. He would need to go on a vacation after the holiday season was over.

Chapter End Notes
starting from the 17th of October I will have to make room in my writing time for some real-world things. Writing time will be short, and access to the internet almost non-existent, so I will move the date for the next chapter a bit to accommodate those demands on my time.

With my phone I will be able to read my mail and see your reviews. But I will probably not be able to answer any of them.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published on the 6th of October 2017
Next chapter planned for 25th of October 2017
In a little over two years this story has grown to sixty chapters. I never would have made it this far without all the comments and questions you have left me here. Your continued support has helped me stay on track and managing to keep my self set deadlines. The knowledge that there are people all around the world waiting for the next chapter is a great motivator!
I'm not sure how much longer I will need to get to the end I already have, but I'm happy to know we will make that journey together!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, 9th of December

It was early – and cold – when Kingsley and Dawlish took the Ministry-issued portkey on Saturday morning to a place near the cave they were sent to search. Since the disastrous party under the full moon last Tuesday, all Aurors had been searching the places Lord Slytherin had provided as those he remembered as being used by Fenrir and his cronies before that night in 1981.

They had all amassed quite a bit of overtime. But Kingsley had serious doubts about the Minister’s promise to give them time off to balance those hours of extra work. The way the year had developed since the summer, it felt highly unlikely that there would be time for them to take time off.

“Have the faeries stolen your senses?” Dawlish asked from his side, amusement clear in his voice. Since they had worked on the Dementor attack on school children, the two of them had been unofficial partners, always assigned to the same cases. Considering that they most likely were aligned to opposing political groups, Kingsley wasn’t sure if it was a genius move or a daft one.

“No. Just lamenting the long hours of work with little chance to get paid for them.” Kingsley sighed and stuffed the portkey – a piece of cord probably enchanted by Lord Slytherin himself – into his right robe pocket. “Let’s get this over with.”

They both started to cast spells on themselves. Spells to mask their natural scent, to mask the sounds they would make moving through the forest surrounding them. As was Ministry protocol for the attempt to apprehend werewolves, they had been deposited a good half hour walk away from their destination. It was assumed that the typical werewolf had sharper senses than a wizard or witch.

On one of the first meetings of the Order, Kingsley had asked Remus Lupin if this assumption was based in facts, or if it was just one of those regulations some Ministry employee without any field experience had set into place based on their own fears.

As he had thought, a werewolf’s senses were as good as any wolf’s when the person was transformed, and not any better than a normal witch or wizard’s when in human form. There wasn’t even any bleed-over after a transformation. Remus had explained that the drain of transforming
probably was responsible for that.

Short nods were enough to communicate the fact that they both were ready to leave, following a small map drawn onto parchment that had been handed to them, together with the portkey. It was well done, with enough landmarks to make sure they would find their way, but none of the useless decorations maps made by magical folk often had.

They walked a little while in silence, even their footfalls on the frozen ground muffled by the spells they had cast. “I don’t understand him,” Kingsley stated into the chilly air, his warm breath creating a small cloud in front of his face.

“You don’t understand whom?” Dawlish answered, stepping around a fallen tree, wand in hand, eyes restlessly sweeping over the surrounding area.

“Lord Slytherin. He just doesn’t act the way I had expected he would act.” It might be a little bold, asking someone he suspected was a Death Eater – the man never showered in the communal showers offered at the Auror office, so Kingsley never had seen the man’s bare arms – anything regarding the one who most likely still was a Dark Lord. But who else should he ask? Dumbledore was losing his grasp on reality, or so it appeared, taking into account every action the man had taken since the evening of the third task. Especially the last few months – since he was struck with that curse – had been riddled with questionable decisions. The only other one who might have any insight, was Snape. And as an ex-Death Eater, probably ex, his accuracy and honesty weren’t things Kingsley would trust easily. It was in a way contradictory that he would trust more in the one man he knew who was probably a Death Eater and had never defected to the light.

“And what do you think he should do?” the younger man clad in the crimson robes of their profession – maybe muted colours for work in forests would be a better policy – threw the question right back at him.

And indeed, Kingsley wasn’t sure what he had expected. Or maybe he wasn’t comfortable with his own guileless acceptance of the old Headmaster’s expectations of what was about to happen. They walked another few minutes in silence before Kingsley had come to a decision what he would say to that. “I guess I expected the war to continue the way it had been before the attack on the Potters. Terrorist attacks, murder, that kind of thing.”

Dodging a few low-hanging branches, Dawlish took his turn on staying silent for a while. “I’m sure you’ve heard the same rumours I have. Some of them are pure speculation, but the one that even made it into the Prophet sounds plausible to my ears.” The answer sounded contemplative. “I guess neither of us will ever know for sure.”

Well, that hadn’t brought any new information to light. Or maybe a tiny bit. If Dawlish was a Death Eater then it was possible that even they didn’t know for sure what had happened to change He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named so fundamentally as to change his tactics this radically.

ooOoo

John walked carefully next to his partner through the thick underbrush in the forest, searching for the cave which was, or had been in the past, a werewolf hideout. He had been relatively young when he had joined the Dark Lord. By then the aggressive way to handle things had had already started. “I think whatever the reason for the lack of terror and aggression, we should be glad that it
happened. Or do you wish things would be like you envisioned them? I for one love the peace and quiet…” He trailed off and then laughed. “Maybe not so quiet as that.” There had been too many unusual incidents outside of shoplifters and accusations over supposed dark objects, to call the last months quiet.

That brought a chuckle from the dark-skinned Auror slowly walking through the deep litter of old leaves. “I guess this is better than open warfare. But I have to admit that I feel apprehensive. Before, what would happen was more or less predictable. We didn’t know when and where something would happen. But what happened followed a pattern. Now all bets are off.”

John hummed. “Maybe. You’re older than me. All I ever noticed was my parents arguing if all the bloodshed really was necessary. My mother was always sure that terrorism was the best way to destroy whatever was left of our traditions. Most of my family was concerned over the eradication of values and traditions. Mother always worried that someone she knew would get injured, or even killed.” In fact she hadn’t been happy when John had come home bearing the Dark Mark with pride. She had started crying, convinced that she would lose her son to some skirmish.

She had rejoiced when the Dark Lord had vanished after his attack on the son of James and Lily Potter.

“I think we are almost there,” Shacklebolt said from a spot near a big tree where the ground started to rise steeply and big rocks indicated that they had reached the place where caves were more likely to be found.

Checking that the surrounding area was clear, Kingsley cast a Disillusionment charm on John, who shivered under the feeling of raw egg running down his face. He would take the lead, scouting out the cave, hopefully completely hidden from any possible inhabitants of the cave.

Carefully creeping up the hill, John made it to an opening in the side between two old, gnarled trees. Flickering lights – probably from a fire – on one wall were proof that the cave was indeed in use as a shelter. Sending small blue sparks down between the trees to where Shacklebolt was waiting, John sent the pre-defined signal that he had found the cave occupied.

It took only a short moment for Shacklebolt to scurry up the hill and pause by John, who had lifted the charm hiding him from view. Since they were about to attack a group of werewolves, it was better that they were able to see each other. With them invisible, the risk of one of them accidentally hitting the other with a spell was too high, cancelling out the advantage of not being seen by their adversaries.

A nod from Shacklebolt started their further investigation. Wand at the ready, a stunner already on his lips, John slowly made his way into the cave, carefully placing his feet to avoid making noises on the rough ground. A rock tumbled by one of his feet would make sounds rolling over the stones and dirt of the ground.

Voices and fire reflected from the walls made it more than clear that there were more than three people deep down in the cave. On the list from the Dark Lord, this cave had been described as simple, only one entrance and no out-branching side arms. If the people inside were to run, they would have to go past them.

When John’s eyes fell on the group, his first thought was disbelief. Those were the werewolves the whole of wizarding Britain was afraid of? There sat six people. Two women and four men. All were clad in threadbare robes and a mismatch of other clothes. Most of them didn’t even have shoes. They sat around the fire, huddled close to stay warm, talking and occasionally laughing about something, eating what smelled like roast rabbit.
Maybe the rumours were true after all, that werewolves tried to discard anything human. Or they just had nothing better because they were outcasts. Either felt equally likely to John, and probably there were wolves living in rags for of both of those reasons.

Shacklebolt was pressed to the wall on the other side of the small passage, concentrating intently, wand held close to his chest. Their eyes met over the gap between them, and then they jumped into action.

The moment they moved, two stunners flew into the group of people, knocking out two of the people sitting around the fire. One fell forward, landing directly in the flames. The woman next to him jumped up, screaming, before she grabbed the man – his hair on fire – and dragged him out, falling to another stunner shot from John’s wand.

Then the moment of surprise had passed and the suspects started to fight back. One of the men picked up a rusty knife, sprinting at John, just to be felled by another stunner from Shacklebolt, to fall to the floor and into his own weapon. The last two standing – one woman and one man, both with dark hair – got out wands from somewhere and managed to erect shields, deflecting another two stunners.

As the two left their comrades – or was it pack? – behind, Shacklebolt and John carefully advanced. The two with wands moved into another passage leading away from the place now filled with unconscious people and the smell of burned hair. John kept an eye on them, covering his partner while he bound the four downed suspects with conjured ropes. “You can’t escape, just give up!” John called. There was no harm in trying to make them give up. It would probably spare them some pain, and the two Aurors some work.

But the defiant answering shout of “Never!” put an end to that line of thought.

Silently communicating, they decided that John would go under a disillusionment charm to take the two remaining suspects out, while Shacklebolt would guard the captives and John’s back.

Creeping through the small, den-like place, John heard frantic whispers from the passage the two remaining werewolves had vanished in. But before they could come up with an escape plan, John had made his way over and stunned the two, one after the other.

Levitating them both back into the bigger part of the cave, where Shacklebolt was casting some easy diagnostic and healing spells, John moved back to his partner. “That was too easy.”

“What are you talking about?” Shacklebolt wanted to know, checking the ropes on the one that had fallen into the fire before casting a general healing charm on the blond-haired man.

“Overpowering them, incapacitating them. It was too easy!” Shouldn’t it have been harder? These were werewolves. Dangerous creatures, as far as Ministry laws were concerned. The tales and what he just had seen just didn’t go together, at all.

Shacklebolt snorted, throwing John a disbelieving look. “After all this time in the department you still buy the Ministry propaganda? A werewolf is dangerous on the nights of the full moon. Most other days and nights they’re just ordinary people. And even with most of them being wizards and witches… they’re no match for an Auror. Those infected at a young age most of the time have no real education either.” The older Auror shrugged and checked a last time on their captives.

The arguments seemed sound, and with the evidence right before his eyes – it had been too easy – he had to believe it. Now he understood why his Lord worked on changing the laws regarding werewolves, they had been made with the supposed danger of werewolves in mind. Laws based in
lies, prejudice, and ignorance couldn’t be good for a society.

With help from two more Aurors called in as reinforcements, they managed to get the suspects to the Ministry and the holding cells. Now they had to try to make them talk. Get them to spill what they knew about the rest of the attackers on the Bones party. Probably not an easy task.

Right after a late breakfast sitting at the Slytherin table, with Hermione and Luna on the bench across from him and Theo, Harry walked up to the infirmary. He was to meet with Mrs. Goyle again.

Since the moment he had grabbed that first-year by his robes, Harry had thought about this appointment and what he wanted to speak about. His regular occlumency training had helped him cope with the rushes of anger that had led to rash behaviour in the past. But in hindsight, his own actions reminded him of Dudley. And he shuddered at the thought of acting like his bullying cousin.

The infirmary was almost empty. Only Madame Pomfrey was bustling about, parchment rolls in her hands, her hair a little frazzled. She probably was sorting paperwork, or something like that. She barely acknowledged Harry when he greeted her as was proper according to all the lessons Madame Malfoy had drilled into his head over the summer.

The door to the private room they used for these meetings was open, and Harry could see Mrs. Goyle pouring herself a cup of hot tea. A fresh canvas had been set up on an easel, brushes and paints stacked on a small table beside the seats.

“Good morning, Mrs. Goyle,” Harry greeted from the door, stepping in when she waved for him to do so, smiling, to close the door and walk over to his designated chair.

“Good morning. Have a seat. Do you want a cup of tea?” She added a spoon of sugar to her cup before she started to stir her tea slowly.

“Yes, thank you,” Harry nodded, carefully sitting down, folding his hands in his lap. A cup to hold onto and to stare into might help him through this meeting. Sometimes it was really hard talking about what he had experienced, what he was feeling, and what the reasons for his feelings and decisions might be. Drawing and painting were great for that too.

While tea filled the second cup, Harry’s eyes fell onto the painting supplies. If he wanted to create a painting of Hogwarts for Marvolo he would need more – and better – supplies in his room. He had his drawing pad and the great coals and pencils Marvolo had given him before he had boarded the train back to school. But he had no easel, canvases, oil paints, brushes, or any of the other things he might use to create a real oil painting.

“What about getting more supplies for painting? Drawing is nice, but I want to paint more. And there isn’t an art class at Hogwarts...” he trailed off awkwardly. Asking for things he wanted to have still was hard. But he really needed those things for the present he wanted to give. Why it was so important to make something special and give it to Marvolo on the man’s birthday, Harry wasn’t sure. But he knew it was important to him.

“I normally order the things I use at my office from a local arts supply shop. But I guess they
wouldn’t know how to deliver to Hogwarts, or what to do with Galleons.” She smiled gently, inviting Harry to share in the joke. “I don’t know where to get such things in the magical world. But you can ask your friends. Miss Granger has muggle parents?” Harry nodded. “They could get you what you need and send it here. Maybe one of those with magical parents know, or can find out, where to get these things in Diagon Alley? I’m sure Lord Slytherin would be happy to get for you whatever you wish.”

Nodding slowly Harry had to agree. All evidence pointed towards that outcome if he asked Marvolo. The man was happy to buy things for Harry – with the money of the Potter vaults the man was managing at the moment – but why he did so was unclear. Harry felt it was more likely to be out of some kind of need to present a certain image, than because the man wanted to make Harry happy. “He probably would. But I don’t want him to know, yet. You asked what I was going to give Marvolo for Christmas. I thought a book was good. But his birthday is coming up as well, and I want to paint something for him. If he's the one to get those supplies for me… I guess I want it to be a real surprise?”

Mrs. Goyle nodded thoughtfully. “Asking your friends is the best bet then, I would guess. If that doesn’t work out, you can send me an owl and I'll get you what you need and bring it with me the next time we meet.”

“Thank you. I might do that.” Harry hoped Hermione or maybe Theo could help. Because he already was on a tight schedule as it was. To have to wait for the next therapy session would be cutting it too close.

“How have you been?” Mrs. Goyle started on the therapy session with one of her usual questions. Causing Harry to take up his cup of tea – now considerately colder – to have something to do with his hands.

“Quite well, I would say.” Harry took a sip from his tea, looking everywhere but at the woman sitting opposite from him. “Classes are going well. Maybe with the exception of Defence. The Professor and his insistence on only preventing violence, and that using violence ourselves is not the way to go is, frankly, frustrating.” Carefully taking a sip, Harry thought about the reason for his frustration with Professor Slinkhard. “Or maybe it’s simply the fact that what we learn in his class doesn’t prepare us for the OWLs next spring. And that in turn annoys Hermione, causing her to be annoying herself.” His friend’s constant harping about their need to self-study was getting on his nerves. The fact that Ron was really getting ticked off faster and faster when they were trying to study together, wasn’t helping in any way, either.

“The club you are leading is going well?”

Harry felt a small smile on his lips. He knew exactly what she was doing there: Showing him what good he was already doing to improve the situation. He wasn’t helpless, he already was doing something to learn what he needed to know.

“It is. I’m already planning the next meetings, and the first one after the holidays. I plan to let the club members practice how to incapacitate someone without really harming them.” Planning those meetings was fun. And explaining how to cast a spell to others, working one on one, was fun too.

“So what is it that’s occupying your mind? I see clearly that there’s something bothering you.” Mrs. Goyle was truly a perceptive woman. She always saw more than one would think. Maybe it was a common skill among psychiatrists. It sounded plausible.

For a moment Harry was unsure where to begin. And as always Mrs. Goyle only sat there, drinking her tea, not putting any pressure on Harry to answer quickly. So Harry took his time to plan out
how he wanted to explain his problem. Or rather the problem which had bothered him the whole time since it had happened.

“I guess you know about werewolves?” She nodded, “One of my parents’ best friends is a werewolf. He’s a nice guy, and my history tutor. This Tuesday was the full moon, and a few rough werewolves attacked a party. It caused quite a backlash for Marvolo’s attempts to replace some of the more absurd laws regarding werewolves.” A quick glance made sure Mrs. Goyle was still following along, and Harry took a deep breath to steel himself for the hard part. “A few days later one of the first-years said it would be better to just get all werewolves rounded up and killed. I simply lost it. Grabbed the kid by his collar, almost shaking him. I managed to not hurt the boy, but it was a close call.” Harry was unsettled by the shakiness of his own voice. The telling of the story brought back the feeling of nausea and revulsion he had felt every time he had contemplated that situation after the fact.

“I gather that the demand to simply kill all the people suffering from a particular affliction is going against everything you feel is right?” the poised, professional-looking woman asked.

“Oh course it’s wrong! You can’t just kill someone because he might pose a danger. We would have to kill every witch and wizard. Every human for that matter! Each of us can harm and kill. With our bare hands, a chair, a wand! Just because we can, Doesn’t mean we will!” Harry was panting a little, and felt himself flush – probably a brilliant red – the moment he realized that his Gryffindor heart had taken control of his mouth.

“So you were defending the principles of most modern states, and human rights. What about your reaction unsettles you so?” She was really good at formulating leading questions, making Harry think about why he reacted a certain way, why he made some decisions, or was unhappy in certain situations. It was disconcerting. Even now that he noticed, he had no way to resist her attempts to make him understand. Or maybe he just didn’t want to resist. She was doing it to help him, after all.

Again Harry took his time, filling his cup with new tea, adding sugar and milk with deliberate movements, before he answered. “The violence. I behaved like a bully. I don’t like bullies.” There, that was the truth without saying too much of the things he would rather forget.

“How do you define bully?” She took one of the few small cakes sitting right next to the teapot, giving Harry the time to formulate his answer.

Every time the word bully came up, Harry’s first thought went to his cousin and uncle. Dudley and Vernon Dursley were the epitome of bullies. Right after that, Luna’s situation came to mind, followed by McLaggen and his friends. “A bully… a bully is someone picking on someone smaller, or just weaker. Taking things away, hurting, with fists and words. And all only because they can and have fun doing so. Putting others down to feel strong.”

Silence fell over the room. Mrs. Goyle had an expectant expression on her face, clearly waiting for Harry to realise something. And Harry had indeed realized something. The moment she had him define what a bully was, he knew that he might have been violent, but it didn’t really fit what a bully would do. “You say I’m not a bully for reacting the way I did?”

“That is exactly what I’m saying. Your reaction wasn’t ideal, but you’re human, Harry. And humans make mistakes. But you didn’t do it to have fun, did you?”

Harry shook his head. “No.”

“And you didn’t do it to make the other feel small and helpless, did you?”
“No.” He clutched his cup, the heat seeping through the china into his hands. He hadn’t done it with any of that on his mind. His own violence had scared him.

“We can discuss ways for you to handle such a situation better, should something like this come up again. But you are not a bully just because you defended the rights of others, spoke out against bigotry. That was a brave thing to do.”

The rest of their time they discussed ways Harry could defend the rights of werewolves against bigots without resorting to violence. Harry felt reminded of his actual defence lessons, but better prepared nonetheless. Now he had an array of arguments ready to confront anyone daring to question the rights of werewolves in front of him again.

With his mind eased and a plan of action regarding the supplies he would need for Marvolo’s birthday present, Harry left the infirmary, running into Luna who was skipping from stone to stone in the corridor, making her slow way towards the stairs down into the entrance hall.

“Hello, Luna!” Harry greeted his younger friend from Ravenclaw with a smile.

She turned – earrings looking somewhat similar to Brussels sprouts swinging with the motion – and gave him a happy smile in return. “Hello, Harry. You look better than during breakfast. All the Nargles are gone now. Want to come down to the greenhouses with me?” After so much time studying with Luna for Runes, Harry had no problem following her quirky and abrupt changes in topic. He just smiled more. It was nice to speak with someone who seemed to be able to ignore the opinions of others and be only true to themselves. If they had been in primary school together, she probably never would have let herself be scared away by Dudley, as so many others had.

“I wanted to ask Hermione something. But when I’m finished with that, I guess taking a walk outside, and having a look at the plants in the greenhouse, would be a nice thing to do.” Her smile was radiant and she turned to skip alongside Harry on the way to the library.

He would ask Hermione about art supplies and if her parents would be willing to help him get what he needed, then he would have a nice time with Luna walking around outside, enjoying the clear air and the warmth of the greenhouses.

Some days were good. Even when most of his life still was in turmoil while he searched for a place and a way to deal with his complicated family situation. There were good times.

oooOOooo

Near the end of the first term they always had another staff meeting to speak about their students, those that had problems with their classes, those that caused nothing but trouble, and those that were doing exceptionally well.

Severus was sulking in his corner, holding onto a strong cup of coffee sweetened with honey. Pomona and Filius were talking animatedly over by the window, the others were leafing through their parchments with notes on the students, while Minerva herself sat on her chair waiting for the Headmaster to finally grace them with his presence.

Since the start of the school year, her old friend had had less and less time for school affairs, leaving more of the work to her, cutting into her already short supply of free time.
With a sigh, Minerva waved her wand and let the plate of biscuits float over to her, so she could take a few and place them on the saucer next to her cup of tea. The smell was divine, so Minerva leaned back in her chair, stretching her legs, using the time to relax and contemplate which of her favourite books she would read this evening.

It was almost half an hour after the scheduled starting time of their meeting, when the Headmaster finally arrived.

Minerva felt vexed. She could have finished a lot of the paperwork waiting for her on the desk back in her office. The others seemed to share her sentiments. Filius even had called for one of the house-elves and had her bring a stack of essays from his office to grade. Severus had sat quietly in his chair – possibly meditating – and now had his unreadable mask back in place. But she knew him well and was sure that her younger colleague was simmering inside, wishing he could have spent this time with his new wife, or at least with something productive.

“You haven’t waited for me to begin, surely?” blue eyes peered at them over the rim of the old man’s half moon glasses. The Headmaster stood in the door to the staff room. “Minerva, you could have started the meeting without me.” Something bristled inside of Minerva at his chiding tone. She wasn’t a little girl. Hadn’t been a girl in a long time. Why was Albus insisting on making everyone aware that he was older?

“You should have sent a message that you would be late, Albus. You’re normally here early and insist on being a part of this meeting. We thought waiting would be best.”

With calm, even strides the Headmaster walked to his chair, sitting down with a flourish of his robes – which were an intense dark red – waving for them to start. So Minerva did. “Let’s start with our new first-years. Have any of you noticed one of them struggling?”

She looked over at Filius who – as was almost traditional by now – started with the new Ravens he felt had trouble adjusting to boarding school. The others chimed in with their own observations and ideas, working around the table from one Head of house to the next, letting each professor add to the discussion.

As usual, the meeting dragged on for several hours. There were many students, and there were many reasons to speak about individual students. From too-challenging lessons to too-easy ones. Minerva was a little surprised that Mr. Slytherin – she still had trouble calling the son of James and Lily that – was doing much better than in past years. His writing was more readable, his work no longer the bare minimum necessary. All of them agreed that he was paying better attention in class and seemed to come to class prepared. In some classes just better prepared. But Severus always had maintained that the boy didn’t do the required reading. He even was doing well in Ancient Runes, despite his late start in the subject.

Minerva had thought being separated from Miss Granger would rather hinder Mr. Slytherin’s performance. But maybe the fact he no longer was a regular player on one of the teams, and that he spent less time with Mr. Weasley – the youngest, to be precise – was counterbalancing the loss of Miss Granger’s encouragement to study.

“Before you all leave again,” Poppy spoke up over the rising din, once they had finished with their discussion, “I want to remind you that it’s time for the yearly health checks the school provides and demands of its staff. As not one of you has reacted to my politely worded invitation to come by the infirmary to get it done and out of the way, I will now inform you that I have set up a schedule to conduct the exams over the next week.” The medi-witch looked around the room with steel in her eyes, and Minerva felt that a student witnessing this would have laughed so hard they would have been rolling around on the floor. Not one of the professors liked to get prodded, so they all avoided
the yearly check up as long as they could manage. And now – being caught out – they very much looked like a bunch of unruly children.

Severus was about to protest, but the resolute woman cut him off. “There will be no excuses, no forged reports from other medi-wizards or -witches, nor any healers. I will be the one to administer the exam. Don’t be so shy about it. And I’m sure our Headmaster will be more than willing to lead by example and be the first right on Monday evening.” There was murmured agreement, but it didn’t sound all that enthusiastic.

“Sheadmaster, I want to inform you all that I will be away from the school on Monday due to some family matters,” Severus said into the starting noise of them all getting ready to leave.

“A weekday, my boy?” the Headmaster asked, bushy brows climbing up his forehead. “You can’t leave your classes alone the whole day. And isn’t this a little short notice?” There was it again, the chiding tone and the demeaning address.

Minerva was about to interject, when Severus spoke up. “There is a rule in place that enables a professor to take time off to deal with family matters if she or he provides a replacement for the missed lessons. Sonja agreed to teach the classes on Monday. General ways to judge the freshness of ingredients, how to avoid cross-contamination, and so on. It perfectly supplements the Potions curriculum. I don’t foresee any problems.”

Minerva nodded her head in appreciation. That rule was indeed on the books. In fact, back under Headmaster Dippet, and many of his predecessors, it had been used to bring in some different speakers for the classes and give the professors some much-needed free time to keep up with new developments in their fields.

The use of this rule had declined under Albus’ tenure. But Minerva wasn’t sure why that was.

“Thank you, my boy, that sounds like a good idea. I hope the family matters you have to attend to aren’t something dire.”

Because she had much to do – and dearly needed a bathroom break – Minerva left in the direction of her own quarters. There was a stack of fifth-year essays waiting for her. And as usual, Miss Granger had easily written double the length required. Maybe she should try once again to get the girl to stick to the requested length. She surely would earn a good bottle of scotch from all of the girl’s professors for that feat.

With a small smile on her lips, Minerva hurried from the staff room up the stairs to her quarters.

Sunday, 10th of December

Bill was a little apprehensive about the meeting he was about to attend. The talk with his father had helped a little to clear things up. But in the end he had to live with his decision. And he had decided to help Lord Slytherin in his quest to repair his soul, in the hope that it would be better for Harry in the end, if the man who had adopted him was more human.
But before he could go to the goblins to ask for permission to relay details of the ritual used to move a horcrux from a container they wanted to keep into something they didn’t mind destroying, he needed more information from the man himself. Like what he already had tried, how many times he had split his soul, and other things like that.

They had arranged their meeting in this restaurant in muggle London by owl, and now Bill sat here in his only muggle suit, waiting for the other to arrive. It was a little surreal to meet with a man who had been called a Dark Lord – and most likely still was one – with a bad attitude towards the non-magical in a non-magical place.

And what a strange place it was. It was a small cozy place that reminded Bill strongly of Madam Puddifoot’s. All small doilies, plush couches, flower patterns, and sweet smells. One might expect old ladies or lovesick teenagers in a place like this. But Bill watched with bemusement as young men and women in clothes fit for a fancy bank, or in things that looked as if they had been purchased at random from a second-hand shop, came in, sat down, smoked and ate.

One thing was sure, his presence here wouldn’t be memorable. Even if he had dressed in the way some wizards did – those that had lost touch with the muggle world, or never had any understanding of it in the first place – he wouldn’t have stuck out among the people who seemed to be regular patrons of the tea shop.

Sipping on his strong coffee, Bill had to concede that the drinks and probably the food were good. Just before he had finished his first cup, the small bell on the door sounded another arrival. This time it was a man in an expensive suit with a serious expression, not the giddy anticipation some of the others had shown when they had arrived.

Bill instantly noticed that this was the man he had waited for. The way he held himself, the way his eyes searched the room for hidden threats, the way one arm and hand were held, ready to let a wand fall from a holster strapped to one forearm, were all obvious tells. Working for Gringotts in Egypt had schooled his eye for possibly dangerous people. More than once shady wizards had tried to lay claim to what they had found in the tombs. And a few groups had tried to protect their national heritage against the goblins and the wizards working for them. Bill always had tried to keep away from that tangle of issues. He was there for the adventure, not to discuss if some government of the past had had the right to make a contract with the goblins regarding the historical sites they were now systematically raiding, or if those contracts were even worth the parchment they were written on.

Bill debated for a moment whether he should stand to greet the older and more powerful wizard, but before he could come to a decision Lord Slytherin had already spotted him on his slightly saggy blue settee and had made his way over to him, nodding in greeting and sliding onto a pale – probably faded in sunlight – green armchair on the other side of the small table.

“Mr. Weasley, I’m grateful for your willingness to meet with me.” The man placed a leather portfolio on the table between them. “I brought some notes of what I have been working on. I guess another point of view and a second opinion might help me get it to work properly.”

Bill reached across the table for the leather-encased parchments, waiting for a protest or something like that, but Lord Slytherin just let Bill take the portfolio and turned to the young woman with blonde hair done up in some elaborate braid to give his own order – sweet hot chocolate and a piece of fruit bread with cream – before turning back.

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them crossed out, others circled. There were snippets of ritual phrases, rough sketches of runic circles, and lists of herbs, stones, and other objects often used in cleansing rituals.

Bill's brows rose high on his forehead, vanishing into his hairline. This looked a lot like notes on the creation of a powerful and dangerous ritual. And the creation was further along than he had thought it would be. The redhead swallowed before he let his eyes rise from the parchment now placed in his lap. “These are your notes on the ritual you hinted at… Lord Slytherin?” There was a slight tremble in his voice, and Bill silently cursed himself for this show of anxiety. He wanted to appear strong, but he didn’t know enough about the man sitting just out of arm's reach to be comfortable with the situation.

“Yes. Those are my notes. Well, I tossed out everything that wasn’t legible, and sorted them a little better. I don't think there's anything missing. What do you make of it? Do you see problems, missing parts?” There was a tension in the other man Bill hadn’t anticipated seeing. Lords generally had masks able to hide everything. Or so he had thought. Maybe if it was important enough, those masks became less impenetrable. Or maybe the so-young-looking man was playing him and showing tension on purpose. There never was a way to know for sure.

The young waitress interrupted their discussion, so Bill waited until she had placed the plate and cup before Lord Slytherin, before he answered the question. “What I gather from the notes, you have two different attempts to create an extraction sequence, and only one to settle the… piece into a new container, binding it. I’m not sure I see where the difference between the two extraction sequences is, but on first glance they look like they should work. There are a few runes I don't recognize in the containment circle. Why have you chosen to combine them with the old hieratic symbols? What purpose do they serve?” Working with the goblins didn’t normally involve a lot of inventing new rituals. There was a set number of rituals the Ministry approved of – which was by no stretch of the imagination a large one – and only a handful more the goblins did use anyway. And most of those were in some way related to matters of inheritance and adoptions, and a few ways to clean objects of dark magic. So this opportunity to see the development of a new ritual was exciting. Even if it was just the re-invention of something that might already exist somewhere in some goblin heads, it was the most captivating thing Bill had encountered since that curse in one of the tombs he had worked on which duplicated body parts from anything that touched the cursed object.

Quickly swallowing a piece of his fruit bread, Marvolo nodded. “Those are Babylonian in origin. I have seen them in another ritual connected to the subject matter. They are connected especially to the soul and to magic. As far as I understand, they are the best suited to have a stabilizing effect.” With the parchment notes spread between them, a lively discussion started. Bill asked questions and got answers, so he could better understand what the goal behind this ritual was, as well as the reasoning behind the choices made.

It was well over an hour – and several more cups of coffee and tea – later when Bill finally had gathered enough courage to ask the question that had preyed on his mind the whole time since the Headmaster had told them about You-Know-Who’s horcruxes. “So these are to move a piece from a living vessel to an object?” If this was the case then maybe this man really was willing to change his ways.

Lord Slytherin nodded. “You understand that I want to be sure that the living vessel will take no damage. I plan to test it, that’s the reason for the second extraction sequence.” A slender finger pointed to the part of the notes containing that information.

“How did it even happen that a living… vessel was created at all?” Bill had been a moment from saying living thing, but as he had to remind himself, that thing actually was Harry, and not a thing
at all. So vessel was the most vague and still respectful term he could come up with.

“I certainly didn’t plan on it. But I went there prepared to create one that night. When everything went… wrong, it must have happened by accident. Not that I had thought something like that at all possible. But the information I worked with, and still do, was spotty at best. Even contradictory in some aspects. It seems logical to assume that without all the information, there were things that I missed. Like the severe side effects.” He sounded calm and collected, but his eyes were entirely too unmoving, his arms held too rigid, to make that believable.

Maybe talking about a night he almost died was the reason for that. Bill decided to change the topic quickly. Or he tried to. “You actually have something to practice with? I know that there were two already… rendered ineffective. Then there’s the one in the living vessel. And then there’s one more?” Two already destroyed, one in Harry, one to practice with. That made four horcruxes. Four murders to rip apart the soul. Suddenly Bill was glad he had decided not to get anything to eat.

“I have more than one try to make the ritual work,” Lord Slytherin stated with a deathly smirk. “Discussing this with you helped a lot already. Now to the other problem I’m working on. It seems I’m not in a position to re-integrate the pieces through the only way that has been documented. Whether it is because there is still so much missing, or because of other… damage, I still want to stitch them back together. I haven’t made much progress on that ritual because… well. Will you have a look?” Another, smaller, bunch of parchment was placed on the table and slid over towards Bill.

With his blue eyes wide in surprise, Bill reached forward, cautiously picking up the small bundle. Was this still part of the official story, the disguise? Or was this actually true? Until now the discussion had been pleasant, and pretty much legal. Even if they had spoken about a ritual related to horcruxes – the darkest magic Bill had encountered until now – a Ministry employee would have classed what they had talked about as grey at most. Or would if the context wasn’t known.

Bill grimaced. Well, maybe the magic had been darker than the general public was comfortable with, but the discussion hadn’t strayed from what the curse-breakers regularly discussed over a good meal. “Why ask me for… assistance? There must be other curse-breakers. People you have worked with in the past?” And it was a conundrum. Why would Lord Slytherin chose to consult a curse-breaker who was close to Dumbledore and not one affiliated with the Dark? It didn’t look like a well-reasoned decision.

A levelled look was aimed at Bill, making him want to squirm in his seat. “The old Headmaster had already told the lot of you. Or so I learned. Those other curse-breakers you speak about don’t know the specifics. And I would rather not increase the number of people... in the know. All I've heard about you suggested that you are skilled at your chosen profession. And the rumours have been proven true.” Those words sent chills over Bill’s back. How did the man know that the Headmaster had told them about the horcruxes? Had one of those disagreeing with the Headmaster talked? Was Snape a true spy for Lord Slytherin? There always had been rumours the man was a Leglimens. Maybe he had picked the information from one of their Aurors or Dodge, during one of the Wizengamot meetings?

“I'll have to read these notes carefully.” Bill held up the small package. “I think you're on track with the ritual to move the pieces. For the other, I can ask around if you want me to. I won't promise anything, but it might be worth a shot?”

Lord Slytherin nodded. And then started to ask a barrage of questions of his own. From the best time in the moon phases, or even the year, to perform the ritual he was designing, to the
requirements of a ritual room to do it in. He had never been to a ritual room at the bank – or so he claimed – and was curious what the goblins deemed the most suitable environment to perform rituals in.

When Bill finally was on his way home, he felt even more conflicted. It had been a truly interesting afternoon. He seldom had the opportunity to talk so freely about a topic he was interested in, or had so well-versed a conversation partner. Even the Master he was currently working under hadn’t that much insight and knowledge. If the man hadn’t been a dark wizard bent on murdering everyone opposed to him in a not-so-far-away previous life, he would have made a good – dare he even think it? – friend.

Well, if what he had seen today was really the truth, there might be hope for the man. And if that came to pass, there might be a possible friendship there. No reason to condemn Lord Slytherin from the start. But enough reason to stay wary around him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published on the 25th of October 2017
Next chapter planned for 3th of November 2017
Another Lord

Chapter Notes

This chapter was hard to write. Not really sure why. But now it's finished and I hope you like the buildup :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday, 11th of December

Sonja watched with a barely suppressed smile as Severus paced in their bedroom, already halfway dressed in his new fancy Wizengamot clothes. He made an impressive figure in the tailored trousers, highly polished ankle-high boots, silken shirt with silver cuff-links, and a waistcoat almost entirely covered with embroidery of a deep black. “Calm down, Severus. This isn’t like you at all. I never have seen you this ruffled.”

It was clear she hadn’t managed to banish the amusement from her voice, when dark eyes levelled a quelling look at her. “Well, I’ll have to keep up appearances once I leave our rooms. I had hoped that I could keep my walls down in our rooms, at least.”

Truly chastised, Sonja stood up from their bed, cravat in hand, and took the few steps over to her husband. She gave him a gentle kiss, and felt his rigid posture ease a little. “You’re right, my love. Please accept my apology.” It was so easy to forget that he was just human like everyone else, the way he normally had such an iron grip on his emotions. Sonja guessed that he only had started showing his happy emotions to her, while he still kept them hidden when he wasn’t around her.

She started to bind the cravat at his throat, when he smiled down at her. “Will you be all right with my dunderheaded students? The Slytherin-Gryffindor fifth-year class was always an exceptionally volatile one.”

Sonja raised one eyebrow to his devilish smirk. “There will be no flames and cauldrons, and you know I made sure that the examples I will give them can’t react adversely with each other. As long as no one actively tries to cause trouble, there is no danger.” She started to giggle the moment he snorted.

“I wouldn’t bet a knut on that. I’m just glad that the NEWT class with the Devil Twins has no Potions today.” He took the robe from a hanger, and slipped his arms into the sleeves. Sonja hurried to help him do up the lacing at the wrists, which made sure that the sleeves would lay snugly around the underarms. Trailing her fingers back down towards his hands, Sonja smiled up at her husband after she had finished doing up the laces.

“Let me braid your hair back, Severus. I think it would look really good out of your face.” She had suggested it more than once already, and she hadn’t much faith he would go with it now, but she was determined to get him to at least try it once, before she would stop pestering him about it.

So his eye-roll didn’t come unexpected and only made her smile. “You don’t want me to? Oh well, then your everyday handsomeness will have to be enough.” That made him laugh, lighting up his
whole face in a way Sonja absolutely loved. He looked so much younger when he smiled or laughed.

Only a short while later they left their quarters, walking side by side, happily chatting about Sonja’s plans for today’s classes. A kiss in front of the Great Hall – ignoring the silent and curious stares of the students walking by – was their goodbye. “Good luck, my love,” Severus murmured next to her ear.

“Good luck to you too, Severus. I have a feeling you’ll need more of it than I today.”

They parted ways and ignored the not-so-coveret glances thrown their way. It seemed that it would take some time until the newness of Professor Snape's being married lost its fascination for the students.

ooOoo

A walk over the grounds – and a short hunt for some mice at the edge of the forest – had been exactly what Minerva had needed on this frosty and dark Monday morning. Now she was on her way back to the school for a nice strong cup of tea and some porridge with almonds and honey for breakfast.

On the path up to the school – or down to the gates, depending on one's perspective – Minerva spotted Severus in a long, billowing cloak over what looked like formal, and expensive, robes. “Severus!” she called to get the younger professor’s attention.

Only a few moments later they met on the gravel way and stopped walking at the same time.

“Good morning, Minerva. Out for an early stroll?” Severus was his normal polite, distant self, making her smile. Despite the fact he had found love, and had married, her young colleague hadn’t changed all that much.

“After a night mostly spent grading homework, I needed a little fresh air to wake up today. You’re up early. I hope your family affairs aren’t anything dire?” There weren’t many occasions calling for formal robes that could be called a family affair. Listening to Severus reassuring her that it wasn’t anything concerning, Minerva suddenly recalled that today was the date of the normal December Wizengamot session.

“You’re going to London!?” Her exclamation cut Severus short and sounded more like a question than like the statement it should have been. Severus was going to claim the Prince seat on the Wizengamot. A bright smile broke the stern face of the Transfiguration Mistress. Despite the fact that Severus neither had confirmed nor denied her assumption, Minerva continued to enthusiastically ramble on. “Your mother always was a bright, politically interested young woman. Or at least she was during her time at school. She would be so proud to know that you are about to take up the mantle of Lord Prince. Good luck!”

Now she had to hurry to get breakfast without wolfing the food down like so many of the teenagers were prone to do. But now she would have a much better day than she would have without meeting the Potions Master. Her heart would be lighter, knowing that he'd finally made a place for himself in the world. It seemed finding the young woman had given Severus new motivation to make something out of himself and his life. She wholeheartedly agreed.
A little bemused by the other’s behaviour, Severus started to walk again after Minerva had resumed her walk up to the castle. It had been some time since he had seen her so outside her normal controlled and stern exterior. The last time it had been concern for him – after his long stay in the Dark Lord’s company – that had broken her normal front.

But now he had an appointment to keep and new information to ponder. Once he had been old enough to understand and remember, there hadn’t been anything left of the young, spirited, politically interested young woman Minerva seemed to remember. Marrying against her parents’ wishes had certainly changed Eileen’s life for the worst. If the letters were to be believed, only her pride had caused her not to seek help with her parents when poverty and her drunk of a husband had caused them to live in misery. Aware that dwelling on the past and possible what if scenarios wouldn’t do him any good, Severus steered his thoughts towards the Wizengamot session and what he would have to do to claim the title and seat of Lord Prince. The explanations he had found in the manor he had acquired had helped him prepare, but a small part of him – hidden in the darkest recesses of his mind – waited to be ridiculed by the Lords who had been sitting there for years, and had been brought up steeped in the traditions of high society. Despite his achievements in Potions and his proficiency in duelling and the mind arts, he still doubted others would pay him the respect due a Lord.

It didn’t take long for him to reach the border of the Hogwarts grounds, walking through the gates with his head held high, where he concentrated on his destination and spun on his heel. The next thing he saw was the front of Griffin House, where his Lord was waiting for him.

With a deep breath Severus took the last few steps towards the door, and raised his hand to knock. Moments later the door opened and a high-pitched voice from the height of Severus’ knees greeted him. “Welcome, Master Potions Master. Master Slytherin is waiting in the office. Please follow Flimm, Master Potions Master.”

And so Severus did. It still felt surreal that this house, in the possession of the Potter family – one he always had associated with strong feelings about what was dark and should be banned – for several generations, was where the Dark Lord lived. Severus guessed that he had to keep up appearances, but the house the meetings were held in just fit his expectations of where a Dark Lord should live much better than this cheerful house.

The walk was a short one, ending in a small breakfast room, where Lord Slytherin just seemed to have finished his breakfast, tossing his napkin down on the table, right next to an empty bowl.

“Good morning, Severus.”

Red eyes swept up and down over Severus, taking in his appearance. “The robes are good. You make a striking figure. Which is more important than it should be, if one wants to make any progress at all.” The shake of the head accompanying this proclamation moved the slightly wavy hair, making Severus recall all the effort he had invested into getting the Dark Lord back into a human body. It was certainly something he could be proud of. Sadly, there was little chance for him to ever publish his findings in this particular project. At least it didn’t look likely at the moment.

Lord Slytherin walked out of the room, Severus following him out into the entrance hall, where an
elf was already waiting with a flowing dark green cloak of heavy fabric. “Let’s go to the Ministry now. It’s a little early, but it would be best if we inform Cornelius beforehand. He’s easier to handle if you drop him some seemingly important information now and again.” A sardonic smirk was turned in Severus’ direction. “I think you should have enough experience in pandering influential figures with what they want to hear, don’t you think?”

Swallowing to get rid of the sudden lump in his throat, Severus nodded. “I guess that being Head of Slytherin House has provided me with ample opportunities to practice speaking in meandering lines around the truth.”

To Severus’ secret relief – and more than a little puzzlement – the only response to that was an amused little chuckle.

Apparating again – this time with the big atrium of the Ministry as his goal – Severus followed Lord Slytherin into a situation he never had faced before. At the moment, teaching a group of Slytherin and Gryffindor first-years how to brew a pepper-up potion looked more appealing than facing the bigoted Lords and Ministry lackeys in the Wizengamot. Why was he doing this again?

Accepting his wand back from the security wizard in the atrium, Severus turned when he and Lord Slytherin were greeted from behind. “Lord Slytherin. Severus! You’re early.”

“And so are you, Lucius. Is there something on the agenda for today that I have missed?” Lord Slytherin answered while Severus only gave a nod in greeting. As usual, Lucius was dressed up just to the point of too much, his robes of the finest material available, his hair gleaming in the torchlight of the atrium.

“Not that I’m aware of. The DMLE probably will update us on their progress in the werewolf hunt, and our friend will add a little bit of excitement, but other than that, I fear it will be a boring meeting, just as usual. It is the festival season, after all.” Lucius smiled coldly, gesturing for them all to start moving again, making room for the next group to approach the security desk. Weaving their way through the crowd of wizards and witches going about their business at the Ministry, the three of them exchanged idle pleasantries. Out here in the open there was no knowing who might try to listen in on a conversation.

When they reached the lifts and ventured into the first one coming their way – Severus dodging one of the paper planes darting out of the lift and around a corner – Lucius looked surprised for a moment when Lord Slytherin pressed the button to get them onto the level where the Minister’s office was located. “We’re going to visit Cornelius?” His question sounded innocent enough, but Severus couldn’t help but remember how the Dark Lord would have reacted in the past at being questioned. A lot had changed since the summer.

“There is still time, and Cornelius always has a good tea at hand. We might as well spend the time until the meeting with a little small talk with the Minister,” was Lord Slytherin's answer, a barely noticeable flick of his eyes – now glamoured blue for the public – indicating a Ministry employee standing in the far corner of the lift.

They walked up to the Minister’s office in silence, Severus pulling up his occlumency shields higher to keep up the composure he demanded from himself in public. It was a little ridiculous that
he was so nervous about this. He had lied to the Dark Lord, a volatile man and one of the best Legilimens alive today. He routinely had relayed information to both sides of the war, keeping a precarious balance between the two. And now he was nervous because some old, rusty people might sneer down at him because his father had been a muggle.

The current assistant of the Minister – and wasn’t that the latest Weasley to graduate... Percy, if memory served – rose and led them to the Minister’s own door without missing a beat. “Lord Slytherin, Lord Malfoy, Professor Snape. What an honour to have you here. Can I bring you something to drink?” The lanky young man, in respectable but simple robes, opened the door and announced their arrival to the man sitting behind the desk. “Minister, the Lords Slytherin and Malfoy, together with Professor Snape, are here to see you.”

With a short nod the Minister dismissed his assistant. “Thank you, Weasley. Please bring in some fresh tea and make sure we won't be disturbed.” Signing a last piece of parchment with a flourish, then placing the quill on a small tray next to the inkwell, the Minister stood and walked towards their little group with a genial smile, his arms held open in a welcoming gesture.

“Welcome, Marvolo, Lucius. What brings you to my door that early in the morning when we were to see each other anyway, later at the Wizengamot?” An exaggerated wave of his arm ushered them over to the seating arrangements next to a fireplace with a merrily dancing fire inside. Easily the most comfortable place for a chat.

Severus took the opportunity to get a good look at the whole office and found his impression of the Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge confirmed. The man was an idiot focused on the material things in life. The number of gem-encrusted artefacts, silk cushions, and rare woods used in the furniture left no room for any other interpretation.

Reluctantly Severus took a seat between his Lord and Lucius, opposite the armchair the Minister was settling down in. It was softer than Severus preferred and forced him to look at a painting behind the Minister which was much too bright to be placed anywhere where it could be seen. In the next moment the door opened again, admitting the young Weasley who was levitating a tray with the different objects needed to make a decent cup of tea.

It didn’t take long until they each had a tea to their liking before them and the Minister leaned back in his seat, his eyes intently focused on Lord Slytherin. “Now tell, Marvolo. What have you planned? More information on the werewolves? I have it on good authority that the Aurors have managed to apprehend a few, following your directions to their hideout spots.” The Minister was gleeful with anticipation, and Severus felt himself reminded unpleasantly of a few of the more troublesome students he had had to deal with over his tenure.

Stirring his tea with far too much sugar – three spoonful in that tiny cup! – the Dark Lord smiled. “No, I have no more information on the werewolves. Lucius and I have escorted Severus here today so he can claim his seat on the Wizengamot.”

Gleaming eyes, much to reminiscent of goblins sensing the opportunity of a good deal, turned to Severus who inclined his head towards the Minister, before he took a sip from his tea.

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“Indeed. My mother was the only daughter of the last Lord Prince. My grandparents left me in the position as heir despite the rift between my mother and them. Now that my wife and I are married, we decided it was time to pick up the mantle that has been left neglected for so long.” Sonja and Severus had decided to make sure everyone knew they were making important decisions together. They hoped this way of going about things would help deter all those people likely to pity Severus for picking a Squib as his wife, or assume he had been swindled. People were only too willing to assume the worst of women seemingly marrying over their own station in life.
The Minister’s eyes flicked down to Severus’ hand where his wedding band sat, before smiling brightly at Severus. “Let me congratulate you on your marriage, Lord Prince. There is still hope we won’t die of boredom during the meeting today.” They all laughed, Severus forcing himself to follow the others’ lead and stopping first.

“I surely hope normal Wizengamot meetings don’t rival teaching the same curriculum year after year?” Severus knew that politics could be tedious, he had listened to enough people involved in it complain over the years, but the manoeuvring was something he was looking forward to. But the way his Lord, Lucius, and now the Minister were acting wasn’t all that reassuring.

Only with long practice did Severus manage not to stare incredulously at the Minister when he started chuckling. “No, no. Don’t fear. Some aspects are quite thrilling, but there are some aspects of our work that can get tedious with time. I guess alternating between teaching our children and your duties as Lord will keep the boredom at bay.”

After that Severus mostly kept listening to the banter and chatter between the other three men. “How are your investments working out, Marvolo? I remember you planning to invest in a German broom company?” The conversation turned over to estate management, investments, and how Lord Slytherin was working on gathering a fortune independent from the Potter money. For a brief moment Severus wondered how Potter felt about the fact that the man who had murdered his parents was now living off their money and wealth. Considering all the circumstances, the brat was doing rather well. Severus certainly never would be happy to associate with Potter’s son, but since this summer the boy had ceased to be such a pain in the ass. Protecting him had become easier, now that the Dark Lord had the same goal as Severus.

They spent the time until the meeting talking about Lord Slytherin's progress in his endeavours to accumulate wealth. It seemed as if Lucius had lent money to the effort as a sort of starting capital. Parts of the earnings were used to pay that initial loan back to Lucius. Most of the talk went over Severus’ head, but he listened with some effort to learn and understand. He had an estate to manage, and, while he knew how to handle his own earnings, the level of understanding needed to manage a big estate and heaps of money still evaded him. Maybe Lucius would be willing to help in exchange for some help for Draco to get a Potions Mastery.

They continued their discussion on the way down to the Wizengamot chamber.

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Sirius stood next to Augusta Longbottom, talking about the upcoming events they were both invited to, when a murmur went through the number of already assembled Lords and Ladies. The Minister had just entered the chamber – of course, wearing his plum-coloured robes – accompanied by Lord Slytherin – the bastard – Lord Malfoy – the smug idiot – and Snivellus. What was Snivellus doing here?

“What’s Snape doing here?” With confusion clear in his eyes, Sirius turned back to Augusta as if she had the answer to the question of the day.

“I don’t know, Sirius. But seeing as the Minister is now here, let’s get over to our seats. The meeting is about to start.” Augusta seemed unconcerned, smoothed down her robes with the Longbottom crest, and walked over to her cherry wood bench. For some reason Sirius hadn’t bothered to learn, she was sitting on the bench itself and not a stool, as was customary for a regent.
Maybe it had something to do with the fact she was also Regent for the Noble House of Potter? Pondering the number of rules, customs, and traditions he still hadn’t managed to get into his head, Sirius walked over to his own bench among the others of the Most Noble and Ancient Houses.

Before he sat down he got out his wand to cast an extra strong cushioning charm on the bench. That thing tended to get uncomfortable pretty quickly once he had to sit there over half an hour. And as he had already learned in the short time he had been Lord Black, when there was a stranger brought to a meeting by one of the members, there would be something unusual happening. And that always ended with long-winded speeches and much longer meetings than he was happy with.

Sitting down on the blessedly soft surface, Sirius spread his robes out so as to avoid creating too many wrinkles. The last time he had brought them back with a lot of creases, the look his house-elf had thrown him had looked like it should be able to kill. He really preferred to sleep soundly, without fearing the revenge of an elf for disrespecting his clothing.

Thankfully the others quickly found their seats, Malfoy on his bench held up by peacocks, a perfect choice in Sirius’ opinion, while Slytherin sat down on the bench with the silver snakes. Snape stayed at the front near the dais where the Chief Warlock and the Ministry Official were sitting. He took a seat on the petitioner's bench, and again Sirius asked himself what reason the greasy git had to be here on a school day.

Maybe he was here as an expert for the Wolfsbane Potion? It would fit the whole werewolf debacle.

The Chief Warlock stood and signalled for the meeting to start. “Welcome to the December meeting of 1995. Our agenda today will be as follows.” Sirius tuned him out. Like all the others, he had received a small scroll with the agenda, together with the invitation to the meeting. It was customary to send those invitations, and Sirius suspected that this was the case because some Lords and Ladies tended to forget to come to attend the meetings.

“Thank you, Chief Warlock.” The moment Fudge started to speak, Sirius returned his attention to the present. This was the most important part of the meeting. Information from the Minister on what was happening in the Ministry. “I’m happy to inform this august body about the success of our Auror corps in apprehending some of the werewolves involved in the attack on the Bones residence.” The small man waved a hand in direction of Lord Slytherin. “This was possible because Lord Slytherin provided us with information on past hiding places of the werewolf Fenrir and his associates. Many of those places seem to be abandoned, but one small cave was in use when two Aurors checked it.” Calls from various places within the hall interrupted the Minister, who waited with an air of impatience until everyone had calmed down and taken a seat again.

“The apprehended suspects are currently being interrogated by the Aurors. They are confident that the captives will help them find the rest of the attackers.” Another excited murmur swept through the hall, a few people calling to just kill the beasts and get it over with. Sirius snarled silently. Every time someone so casually called for killing werewolves, he was reminded of the danger Remus was in from such bigots.

“If that is all you wanted to inform us of, Minister Fudge?” The small wizard nodded and sat down again, prompting the Chief Warlock to get to the next point in the agenda. “Is there anyone among those present who wishes to add a new point of order to our agenda?”

For a moment Sirius had hope that no one would stand to add something to their long list of boring topics. But then Snape stood and turned to give the Chief Warlock a small bow.

“And you are?” There was not a hint of emotion in the voice of the Chief Warlock as he asked this.
Sirius scoffed. These aristocrats were assholes, the lot of them. Everyone knew about Severus Snape, reformed Death Eater, Dumbledore’s spy, and youngest Potions Master in Britain. Asking after his identity in such a way was just a petty move.

“My name is Severus Tobias Snape, son of Eileen Prince. I’m here to claim my family seat in this hall, as I have rightfully claimed the title of Lord Prince.” If there was one thing that Sirius had to say about Snape that was positive, it had to be the man’s iron control and his backbone. Even when they had been teenagers, it had been clear that Snape wasn’t that easily cowed. That had been one of the reasons why the four of them had picked him as a target for their pranks. He was fun to rile up – he still was – and hadn’t been prone to run to a teacher for help.

Doge stood, a scowl on his face. “Can you give evidence for your claim?” Sirius’ eyebrows rose up. Why was Dumbledore’s friend sounding so hostile? This wasn’t coordinated with the old man to get another of his supporters into the Wizengamot? Steel grey eyes narrowed while fixing the Hogwarts Potion Master with a glare. If Snape hadn’t told Dumbledore what he was up to, did that mean he wasn’t Dumbledore’s man any longer? Was he working for Slytherin again? Or had he chosen to stand on his own two feet?

“As far as I know, there are no more slots for ancestry tests at Gringotts open this year.” There was a smug look on the old face, but Snape didn’t seem fazed by that little fact. It had been a topic of gossip on each get-together Sirius had had to attend, so it wasn’t anything new. Snape wasn’t stupid. He had no sense of humour and didn’t take care of his appearance, but he wasn’t stupid. So Snape had known and probably had a solution.

“Why would I need to get an ancestry test from the goblins?” There was so much condescension in this one question, it was a wonder Doge wasn’t shrinking into his own bench to get away from the fire. “I only need to prove that I was accepted as Lord Prince. Don’t you think? You all know that my claim concerning my mother is true. You all know she was the daughter of Lord Prince. So you know I’m the most eligible for the title. We don’t need to know the whole tree of my ancestry to know that much. So why do you ask for it?” Sirius felt a little odd. He had the urge to cheer his old school nemesis on.

The silence following that loaded question dragged on. Then someone cleared their throat. The Minister stood. “I guess it would suffice if we could check the birth certificate of Professor Snape to check if his mother is stated as Eileen Prince. But I doubt that is really necessary. Or is there someone insisting on this pointless complication?”

Sirius waited with bated breath. It was clear that there were many among the Lords and Ladies who weren’t happy with such an obvious half-blood – not even bearing the name of the family he wanted to claim – taking one of the seats among them. That alone was enough to bring Sirius onto Snape’s side for this meeting. If he could annoy the old rigid hypocrites, he would do so with glee, every single time.

While the Minister searched the chamber for anyone who might object, Sirius watched as one of Arthur’s older sons came into the chamber carrying a leather portfolio, taking the few steps needed to get to where the Minister was standing in front of his seat next to the Chief Warlock.

Not one dared to speak up, so Lord Abbott stood and turned to face Snape.

The old man spoke in a serious tone. “Lord Severus Tobias Prince, why have you come here today?” Sirius recognized the traditional words from his own claiming of the seat. It was a farce that neither he nor Slytherin had had to prove the validity of their claim but they had tried to make Snape prove it. Sirius was sure Lily would have blown her hat if this had happened in her time. Many prejudices were still alive and well. Maybe they could work on breaking some of them. Even
if working together with someone like Snape, or Slytherin wasn’t what he really wanted to do. But maybe the goal to make a better world for his godson was worth the hassle.

After the oath had been taken, Snape walked over to the family seat of House Prince, and the boring session went its usual course.

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This evening the Great Hall got to see an unusual group of students sitting at the Ravenclaw table. Harry and his Gryffindor and Slytherin friends were sitting together there in neutral territory, as Hermione had termed it.

“I certainly can ask my parents to get you the paints, brushes, and so on, that you want to have, Harry. But owl post is slow, so maybe it will be too short a time for you to finish the painting if I write them now.” Hermione filled her plate with various roasted vegetables and added mashed potatoes as well as a slice of roast to her meal.

“What are you even talking about?” Pansy – who had followed Draco over to their place at the Ravenclaw table – asked from her place between an amused Theo and an incredulous Draco. “Why do you want to have paint, Henry?” In fact, almost all the fifth-year Slytherins were sitting at the Ravenclaw table with Harry, and three Gryffindors. Only Neville, Hermione, and Ron had joined them. Several of the older Ravenclaws eyed them with curiosity and confusion. Luna was sitting next to them, smiling serenely.

“Because I want to make a painting, of course. Why else?” What did she think he would be doing with oil-paint other than painting? Sometimes the Slytherin girls confused the heck out of him. Only Daphne was easy to talk to. The fact that the Slytherins from his year all tended to follow him around as they did – like ducklings following their mother sometimes – because he was the heir to Lord Slytherin rankled as well. But many of the Gryffindors had done the same. Only his being the Boy-Who-Lived had been the reason for that.

“Most artists make their paint from scratch,” Millicent suddenly threw in from her place next to Vincent. “They buy or gather the pigments and mix their paints with their own recipes.” Her tone was matter-of-fact, and her attention barely wavered from her plate of assorted pastries.

“How do you know something like that?” Draco asked, clearly sceptical.

Millicent snorted, obviously not impressed with the blond’s disbelief. “I’m interested in art. Not that you have made any attempts to get to know me better. When I was younger I wanted to be an artist. But sadly, I lacked talent, so father made me concentrate on something more suitable. He can’t say anything about my interest in art, so I at least still have that.”

Bringing the discussion back to topic, Hermione suggested another solution. “Maybe I can involve Uncle Xerxes in getting you paints. He could pick up the supplies from my parents and bring them here a lot faster than normal owl post.”

Nodding thoughtfully, chewing on his piece of roast, Harry thought it over. It would be cutting it pretty close if he went with that option. But there was no way he would get the paints and canvas here any sooner. He would have to prepare as much as he could and maybe work on the painting in his break. After all, the present was intended for Marvolo’s birthday and not Christmas. There was
a little more time there than if he had wanted to have it finished by Christmas. “I think that’s a
great idea.” He smiled, then got his bag out from under the table, searching for a slip of parchment
he had prepared. “Here’s a list of the things I need. As soon as you can tell me how much it will be,
I’ll give you the money. You can borrow Hedwig to send the list and a letter to your parents.”

They ate in silence for a while, but the moment the plates were cleared and then again filled with
different sweet dishes for pudding, Hermione started to speak again. “The Potions class was
something extraordinary today. Don’t you agree? I loved all those pointers to gauge the freshness
and quality of ingredients. There should be something like this right at the start, in first year.”

Harry smiled fondly, for all that she could be terribly irritating in her quest for knowledge
sometimes, her eagerness and how happy she could get over a lesson was amusing, and so typically
Hermione. “It was a nice change of pace,” Harry started to formulate his own opinion, when Draco
rudely interrupted.

“I don’t know when I’ll ever have to learn this here at school. I would have rather attempted
another potion today, then sort through boxes of dried leaves, and slippery frog liver.” The sneer
that Harry got to see less and less these days, was prominently displayed on the Slytherin Seeker’s
face right now.

But it quickly vanished when Theo asked with false innocence. “I thought you wanted to try for a
Mastery in Potions? As far as I know, a Master Potioneer expects their apprentice to already know
such basic things.”

They finished their dinner with much laughter and friendly teasing, discussing what they had
learned in today’s potions class taught by Professor Snape’s wife.

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At the head table the mood wasn’t as happy as down at the four House tables.

“Albus, I know you have much to do, but I won’t accept your attempts to evade the yearly health
check. I have time after dinner is finished, and I expect you to come with me to the infirmary.”
Poppy spoke with confidence, not meeting her old friend’s eyes. She didn’t want to risk his seeing
her worry. Since the evening Aberforth had called her via floo, she had been on edge. The
Headmaster of Hogwarts affected by a decline in mental health? That was business that could get
nasty pretty fast.

“I’m sure one of the others will be free tonight, Poppy. I really have too much to do and can’t spare
the time. Over the break I might be able to free an hour up.” His blue eyes twinkled as he leaned
over the table, turned so he could look in her direction, a goblet of red wine held in his hand. The
aura of grandfatherly friendliness was strong. But one needed more than puppy-dog eyes to get out
of her care.

“If you have an appointment with someone, just tell them I insisted. I’m sure they will understand.
I’m infamous for my unrelenting pursuit of those under my care to do as I say. And if it’s only
paperwork or the like, it can wait for thirty minutes, for sure.” She let steel creep into her voice.
No errant student nor any of the professors would get out of something needed for their health.
“And I’m sure you don’t want me to drag you up to my office by your ear?” He flushed a little at
this reminder of a not-so-well-known incident she had found in his medical files. The matron of
Hogwarts had had to drag a first-year Albus to the hospital wing, away from his books, to administer a pepper-up potion.

A long-suffering sigh signalled the defeat of the Headmaster in this matter. And in fact, once they all had finished their meal, he followed her up through the castle without complaint. Once they were inside the infirmary, Poppy waved Albus over to one of the beds behind a curtain. “Sit down. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

She bustled over to her office and the file cabinets she kept there under tight wards. Tapping the required places to unlock the cabinet containing Albus’ file, she opened the drawer and picked up the quite sizeable file kept there about the Headmaster. He was no young man any longer, and this file contained his whole medical history from his time spent at Hogwarts, from the age of eleven, through his whole career as a student, to the time he had been a professor here, and now all the years he had been Headmaster of the school.

When she came back into the main room, Albus was sitting in the bed, swinging his legs, looking quite unconcerned. “I will cast the usual general diagnostic charms, and a few that are added to the normal screening once the patient has reached a certain age. Please sit still for that time, until I’m done.”

She hadn’t bothered with some of these charms in the past. Of course she always checked for cancer, problems with the eyes, and so on, but until now she never had cast the charm used to determine if someone was suffering from the early stages of dementia. It was just so unlikely in wizards that it mostly only ever set in when the individual was really old and near to dying. It was also a common side effect of some magics, but as Albus always had been such a light-oriented wizard, she never even suspected he could suffer from such problems.

But with the curse he had been hit with this summer, that might have changed.

The first few charms created small scrolls showing nothing new. Albus tended to eat too many sweets and didn’t move enough. But his teeth were well, the heart was in good condition, as was the digestive tract. His eyes hadn’t gotten any worse. And then Poppy came to the charm to check the brain functions. The scroll for that wasn’t so promising. She wasn’t an expert on this type of problem – after all dementia was a rather rare condition in magical folk – so she decided then and there that she would consult with an expert on this before she discussed it with Albus and informed the board. Because if the Headmaster was suffering from dementia, she was bound by her oath to the school to inform the board.

“See, this didn’t take all that long, Albus. We’re finished. There are some points I’m not sure about and will discuss with an expert over at St. Mungo’s.” She was interrupted in her attempt to explain when Albus stood from the bed.

“That sounds fine to me, Poppy. If that is all, I will be up in my office. There are some things I need to finish tonight.” And he was out the door before Poppy had managed to regain her composure. With a shake of her head, she gathered the new little scrolls, the medical file, and made her way back to her office. She would need to write a report and include the findings of today’s medical exam as well as Aberforth’s observations. It didn’t take long, and then she was kneeling in front of the fireplace calling the hospital. Hopefully her fears would prove to be baseless.

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Back in his room, Harry set his bag down next to his desk, and then walked over to the bed and the side table with its small drawer he stored the mirrors in. As he tended to sit or even lie on the bed when talking on the mirrors, he had moved the mirrors here. It was so much more convenient.

Taking out the mirror Marvolo had given him, Harry sat down, getting rid of his shoes, then scooted back until his back was right up against the headboard, getting comfortable for a call to his guardian.

He didn't have to wait long before Marvolo accepted the call. “Hello, Henry. How was your day?”

Harry smiled a little. It was nice that someone cared enough to ask him about his day. “It was a nice day. Professor Snape’s wife taught the potions class. Defence was as boring as ever. But I had time to spend with my friends. So that helped even the dreadful lesson out.” And spending time with his friends really did help. “And how was your day?” Harry felt good when someone asked about his day. He suspected it would be a nice thing to do to ask in return.

“Long,” Marvolo answered, shifting to sit more comfortably in a wingback chair as far as Harry could see. “Today was the Wizengamot meeting for December, and it dragged on and on. I’m happy that’s finished. And after this call, I want to work more on the ritual to move the pieces between containers.” Marvolo rubbed his hand over his red eyes. He really looked tired.

“Pieces?” At first Harry wasn’t sure what the other was talking about, but then it suddenly hit him. Marvolo was talking about the horcruxes. “So you’re making progress?” That would be good news. If Marvolo managed to create a ritual to move the horcrux safely from one container into another, he might be able to remove the piece from Harry, taking him out of the line of fire from all those that might know about the horcruxes and planned to kill Marvolo.

“Slow progress, but yes, I’m continuously working on it. William Weasley has been so kind as to meet with me to discuss my attempts. He had a few good ideas and pointers. At least for the ritual to move a part. Re-integrating isn’t going as well, I fear. Besides headaches, I have gained nothing from my attempts. I guess I might have to find another approach, or work some more on myself before that will get me anywhere.” Harry was still amazed that Marvolo was willing to discuss such things with him. After all, he wasn’t much more than a kid, and all the other adults who had had responsibility for him before had either not cared at all, or had tried to keep everything that might be troubling or dangerous from him. And the radically different tactic was working. Harry had come to trust that Marvolo would tell him the important things. And that was a first. Not even Sirius had managed to gain that level of trust. He was too easily swayed by Mrs. Weasley, and she certainly was one of those adults convinced that children didn’t have any business with grown-up affairs.

“I hope the ritual will work out. Have you talked about the werewolves and the attack on the Bones party at the meeting today? I wanted to know if the attack will have negative effects.” Harry sounded unsure even to his own ears. He didn’t like it, but he was worried for Remus, he had come to quite like his father’s old friend.

“Dawlish and Shacklebolt managed to apprehend a few of the werewolves at one of the places I told them about. I think we will be able to direct the anger at Fenrir and his people, keeping all the backlash away from the innocent people affected by lycanthropy. So I don’t think that your history tutor will be in any danger.”

Harry nodded, a little relieved.

“Have you asked a girl to accompany you to the Malfoy ball? And maybe to a few of the other events? I know that it’s a little awkward, but both of us will have to have a woman – or a man – to
escort to the parties. I’m still debating who to ask. Maybe I just will ask Benjamin or Xerxes…” Marvolo had looked a little lost, but now he shook himself, focusing back on Harry. “So do you know who to ask?”

Harry blushed. “Well, I don’t need to ask anyone. Because I was asked. Daphne – Greengrass, that is – asked me. We had dancing lessons together over the summer. You remember? She wants to get some more attention over this season so it will be easier for her to find someone to marry.” He made a face, getting a short, small chuckle from Marvolo, Harry had real problems with the custom of arranged marriages for political gain. “So we’ll go as friends. I’ll be free from crazy girls trying to catch my attention, and she’ll get the attention she needs.” Harry made another face. “I really appreciate that you won’t force me into a marriage.”

Marvolo hummed. “I don’t think it works well for most people. Lucius and Narcissa are a nice example that it can work. But most of the time, it's only an arrangement of convenience. Not that those can’t work, but if the personality of the two married don’t work well together, it's doomed to fail. I think you’ll be able to find someone suitable on your own. So there is no need to pick for you. But if you need help, just ask and I will find someone for you.”

At that Harry sent his guardian a fiery glare, earning himself another chuckle. After that they talked about investments Harry wanted to make for the Potter estate, a part of his lessons on how to manage everything, and Marvolo gave Harry an overview of how the investments for the Slytherin family were working out. It got late before Harry went to bed, doing his occlumency exercises as Snape insisted he do.

With a little luck everything would stay peaceful until the break.

Chapter End Notes

I had a good look at the points of the story I still have to tell, and I realized with a start that most of them have to happen before the end of the year. And I thought: are there plots my readers would like to see finished? I have I dropped something I have now forgotten about? Is there something that I didn't elaborate on you are missing? Questions and ideas in reviews are a great inspiration! I love to read all your reviews. The short and the long ones!

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Chapter Notes

Theisaryz-Eufuelle commented that the Scene of the Graveyard would be an interesting one to see from the perspective of my story. And I have to agree, ever since I read that comment the scene rattles around in my head demanding to be written. I guess I should do that. Once it is finished it will be posted as one of the Out-Takes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Interruption

Tuesday, 12th of December

Checking another time that he had all his books for today's classes packed away in his bag, Harry stepped out of his room into the corridor, narrowly avoiding a collision with a small first-year boy sprinting along. Fondly shaking his head – had he been so small himself? – Harry closed the door behind him, feeling the wards going up, before he walked down the corridor to the common room.

With a sleepy sounding "Good morning!" Theo fell into step with Harry, Draco just a few steps in front of them. "I really yearn for the break. All this revising, practising, and writing is getting old."

Harry chuckled. "So you want to go to a lot of stuffy balls instead, Theo?" The answering groan of desperation from Theo, his head thrown back and an arm dramatically flung out, let Harry laugh again. Draco just turned around and rolled his eyes at them both.

With a much better mood, Harry stepped into the common room. The windows were still dark, this early in the morning on a December day there was no light to even try reaching them through the water of the great lake. But the large number of students already up and about made quite clear that breakfast was about to be served in the Great Hall.

Before Harry and the two walking by his side – he had made peace with the fact that a kind of honour-guard of Slytherins was always following him around – reached the exit, Daphne and her younger sister caught up to them. "Good morning, Henry. We need to speak about our clothes for the holiday season."

With apprehension churning in his stomach, because he dreaded the need to get even more new fancy clothes, Harry slightly turned to Daphne, returning her greeting. "Good morning, Daphne. And why do we need to speak about what we will wear?"

Two, no three, low chuckles told Harry that this probably had been one of those questions he wouldn't have asked if he wasn't so new to all this. Not for the first time he wondered what his life would have been like if Dumbledore had seen fit to let him learn all he now knew he needed to know.

With fond exasperation Daphne snatched Harry's arm and linked arms with him, before she answered. "We need to coordinate your robes and my dress. Or rather dresses. It would be horrible, after all, if the colours and styles were to clash with each other."
Remembering some garish examples of wizards trying to dress as Muggles from the Quidditch World Cup, Harry had to agree that a little coordination so as not to make fools of themselves would be a good idea. So he nodded slowly. "Where shall we start? With the hardest? Or one of the easier ones? I've been thinking about the theme for the ball Draco's mother is organizing and I'm at a loss. How do you represent hospitality with something to wear?" It was a puzzle Harry hadn't been able to unravel, and he had spent more than one history lesson ruminating about it.

Daphne laughed. Since the invitations to the Malfoy ball had been sent, the most outrageous ideas about how to dress to match the theme had been tossed about the Slytherin common room. Interestingly enough, Harry had noticed that the teasing and silly jokes stayed inside the common room and dorms. In the public eye, Slytherins behaved, mostly, like snotty little heirs to a fortune, regardless if that was true or not.

"As the heir to two families you will have to wear robes with family colours to most events. I guess we can get away with waiting for ideas from the tailor for those we'll wear to Draco's. So what are the family colours you wear to combine Slytherin and Potter, Henry?"

"The combined robes I have now are a neutral colour – a dark grey – combined with the secondary colours of both Houses." Harry explained, trying hard to remember the correct terms to explain, because apparently it was an important difference what was the first and what the second colour.

"Why would you combine the secondary colours? I wondered when we saw you in them at Aidan's adoption, but I forgot to ask." Theo now used this opportunity to sate his curiosity.

"Because red and green as the main colours to combine are just too much like Christmas decoration. But maybe that would work for this particular occasion?"

Laughing over the picture conjured by Harry's deliberately thoughtful expression and words, the group of Slytherins made their way to the Great Hall. It was a good start into the day.

ooOoo

Harry felt pretty great. Now that he was a Slytherin himself, he got to see a totally different side of his classmates from that House. A much more private side. It wasn't always pretty – Crabbe and Goyle weren't any brighter in the common room than outside of it – but it had shown him that they all were kids just like him. With favourite subjects, those they hated, fears and hopes just like his own.

He could see Hermione and Ron over at the Gryffindor table and was about to excuse himself from the others to sit and eat with them at his old House table, when a girl in Gryffindor robes, a few years younger than him, strutted over to where he was walking, a look of determination on her face.

"Harry, I wanted to ask you to come with me to Hogsmeade on the next weekend we can go." Her voice was strong, her posture rigid, and Harry had trouble keeping his mouth shut.

There was no way to react politely to that. "Sorry, but who are you?" It might not be the nicest thing, but it was a fact: he didn't know her name. The older students almost never bothered to learn all the names of students younger than them. Harry guessed that Hermione knew all names of the younger Gryffindors, but she was a prefect and in a way had a duty to look out for them, rein them in, and so on.

Her face flushed a rather ugly shade of blotchy red. "I'm Romilda Vane, we have been fellow Gryffindors for three years now!" Her tone made clear that she felt insulted over Harry's apparent
disregard of her.

But Harry didn't feel as if he had any obligation towards her. She was pretty enough with her dark hair and eyes, he guessed. But being pretty wasn't the most important thing by far. "Sorry, Miss Vane." The girl stiffened and a spark of anger entered her eyes. "But we barely know each other. And I already have plans to go to the village with my friends. So I have to politely decline your invitation." He gave the girl a short nod before turning to walk over to Hermione and Ron where they sat with Neville and most of the other fifth-year Gryffindors, aware of the few Slytherins still following him. Harry dearly would have liked to add a few adjectives to his refusal of the invitation. But he had learned enough over the summer to know that he would have embarrassed himself as well if he had given in to the urge.

"What a... rude little girl," Draco muttered as he sat down at the Gryffindor table, looking only a little uncomfortable to be here in what he would have called enemy territory just a few months back. Harry just knew that he had wanted to say something much more rude than that, and gave him a pointed look.

"Good morning, everybody. What did Romilda want from you Harry?" Hermione asked filling a small bowl with yoghurt and fruits.

"She asked me out to Hogsmeade. I declined. I already have plans. Luna wanted to go with me, and I guess I just assumed that we all would go together. Buy some things as presents, eat and drink at the Three Broomsticks. Those sorts of things." Harry shrugged and started to fill his plate with an assortment of his preferred breakfast foods. A small phial materialised next to his goblet filled with milk. It was uncanny how the elves managed to get his potions to his plate wherever he sat. Their mixed group of students tended to choose one of three tables at random. Only the Hufflepuff table never saw them sitting down for a meal.

"Have you two ever spoken before?" Hermione asked curious.

"Not that I can remember," Harry answered shaking his head, before he unstoppered the phial and drank down the potion, shaking himself in reaction to the taste. No potion ever seemed to taste good.

"That wasn't the most clever way to go about asking you out," Daphne said, shaking her head, snatching up an orange to peel. "She should have tried getting to know you first."

"But you can't deny that it was brave to just walk up to Harry and ask him," Ron stated from the side before he dug into his breakfast, a book propped up on a pitcher so he could finished the assigned reading for their shared transfiguration class for that day.

Harry had to chuckle at Hermione's glare for endangering a book in this way, and for not doing homework on time. The bushy-haired witch turned her back towards the red-head and addressed Harry who still was amused over the constant squabbling between his two friends. "I sent a letter and your list to my parents yesterday evening. I hope it won't take too long for them to get the letter."

"Thanks for helping me out." Harry smiled over to her before he quickly looked around the table to see if the others were trying to listen in. "I want to make a suggestion. It's been a while since my last dancing lesson in the summer, and I thought it would be a good idea to practice a bit more before we'll be forced to dance in front of an audience. Hermione, Daphne, Theo, Draco, do you think we could practice together?" Harry really was nervous over the prospect of dancing in front of so many people who would gossip over his errors for weeks if he made any. That Daphne had asked him to be her date had helped him out of asking someone to be his date. Remembering the
disaster that had been the whole Yule Ball of fourth year, Harry was really glad that he didn't need to ask someone. But the dancing wasn't something he would get out of. So he had better practice more as long as it was still possible.

All around them students chatted, ate, finished their homework at the last minute, and generally made a big ruckus, while Harry and his Gryffindor and Slytherin friends planned a set of dancing practices.

Watching while Draco and Hermione got into a debate as to what music they would practice, Harry smiled. It felt so good not to fear for his life. Not puzzling out some mystery that would put him at risk. Just talking with his friends, going to his lessons and completing his homework, flying in Quidditch practice. As unstealiy as the year had started, now it seemed to become one of the best years at Hogwarts so far.

oooOOooo

Without his robes – which he had tossed over the only remaining chair – Marvolo moved over the stone floor of the former kitchen on all fours sketching out the latest version of the ritual circle with chalk. Bill Weasley's help had been what he needed to break through some of the blockages in the creation of the ritual. Now he was about to try the ritual to move a piece of his soul from one container to the other. Or at least, he was preparing to.

For the first actual attempt, try he would have to decide which of his horcruxes he would work with, and into which container he would transfer the fragment of his soul. And that was a problem he was currently stuck on. So he had decided to start laying the circle out, a work that needed – no demanded – concentration and careful execution.

It was a distraction from the problem he was currently pondering. Should he use the cup, the locket, or the diadem? He wasn't sure. All his horcruxes had been placed in precious artefacts, and now with the two biggest back in his body, their size wasn't so relevant to his sanity. Or so he believed. And right along with his troubles to select one to test the ritual, Marvolo struggled with the decision into what to place the pieces of his soul. He wasn't about to try to place them into his own body – that could go horribly wrong – but he wasn't willing to just use anything random either. It needed to be something that could be destroyed more or less easily. If all else failed destroying the container – or ordering someone else to do it – would work to restore the pieces back into Marvolo's body. As experience had shown. He would rather not resort to that method, but he felt that moving all the different pieces back into one was an important step.

Sitting back on his heels, kneeling on the ground in the middle of the circle, Marvolo sighed. Why couldn't he just use one of the chipped plates, or cups, which had been left behind in this house? They were as good as anything else, nothing truly important, clearly okay to be destroyed. But no. All of him despised the idea. His soul had no place inside a common piece of porcelain.

Concentrating on his runes once more, Marvolo walked calmly around the circle, checking everything he had done so far. Before he could continue, he should decide on an object to use. Something of significance… maybe he should get something made especially for this purpose and not use something that should be discarded.

Before he could start on that circle of thoughts that had occupied his mind all day again, the connection he had to his Death Eaters flared once for one of them. It wasn't something that happened all that often, but it was the predefined way for one of his to contact him and ask for an audience who normally had no reason to interact with him.

Turning his back on the kitchen and the runic circle, Marvolo decided it would be best to see what
the man asking for an audience wanted. He wouldn't get to testing the ritual today, not until he had a decision for the two cumbersome questions. Marvolo walked the way to his office with quick strides, searching for Barty. It didn't take long to walk the distance and open the door, looking around the room. And there was Barty, in the office, probably working on all the paperwork Marvolo had never even once associated with conquering the world in his own youth.

"Barty, I need your mark." With decisive strides Marvolo walked over to his secretary, watching as the wizard rolled his sleeve up enough to bare his wrist, kneeling down among pooling robes to offer the arm up to his Lord and Master.

Firmly taking hold of the pale wrist and hand, Marvolo watched as the now much smaller Dark Mark came into view. This was a much better way to go about marking his followers. It had to have been youthful beliefs of invincibility leading him to mark his followers as obviously as he had done.

Concentrating on the one Healer he had inside the walls of St. Mungo's, Marvolo pressed his finger into the small mark, sending a small spark of magic into the connection calling for the one he held in his mind. With that done, Marvolo let go of the other's hand, looking around the office. He would have to rearrange a little before he could let the man come in. It wouldn't do to let his follower see what a mess his office got from time to time.

His motion to get his wand and cast a charm to sort the mess was interrupted when Barty cleared his throat behind Marvolo's back. "My Lord." The man sounded nervous.

With no little irritation – probably not only based on the interruption – Marvolo turned to look at Barty only barely restraining a snarl. "What?"

"You have chalk on your trousers, my Lord. And…” he trailed off, only gesturing to indicate the still disheveled state of dress, with rolled up sleeves, the robe missing, his trousers indeed covered with chalk and dust.

Marvolo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Get me a fresh robe." He listened as quick steps moved away from him, the door opened and then closed again, leaving him alone in his office. Another few deep breaths and Marvolo had regained control over his emotions. Concentrating to stay calm, he walked over to his desk, and sat down. Then he sent all the parchments, books, and letters to their places – or at least out of sight – with one spell, spelling his clothes free of chalk and dust with a second flick of his wand. Then he rolled down his sleeves again and closed them with a set of silver cufflinks – fashioned in the likeness of snakes – he took out of a drawer of his desk. Restored to a more intimidating – and proper – appearance, Marvolo sank back in his chair, waiting for Barty to bring him a robe. Maybe he should order himself something to drink and eat. "Flimm!" Not enough to eat and drink could make anyone a little short-tempered. Marvolo remembered only too well nights unable to sleep because it was too cold and his stomach empty. And an endless time just drifting, constantly hungry and cold – decades later – unable to do anything about it. The elf popped into being, startling Marvolo out of his uncomfortable recollections. "Hot tea, cake and biscuits." With a bow and another pop the elf vanished again. With a small groan Marvolo stretched to make his back pop. Crawling around the floor wasn't something he should do for hours on end.

ooOoo

Jeremy Jugson was nervous. Very nervous. As a young man just starting his time as a healer at the biggest hospital in Britain he had gladly accepted the Dark Mark. Shortly after that, his Lord had vanished and Jeremy had buried himself in work. That was why and how he had made his career as the expert on dark magic's side effects on a wizard's or witch's health. Because even with dark
magic declared illegal, there were still curse-breakers exposed to it regularly, Aurors who hunted criminals hexed and cursed. People lived in old houses littered with cursed objects, there were places saturated in dark magic. There were enough people affected that he had enough patients. All in all, he had made his reputation and was now one of the youngest senior healers on staff.

But now he was very very nervous, because he had information his Lord needed to know and was unable to talk about it. Regardless he had felt that he needed to inform his Lord and had used the Mark to ask for an audience. He had felt it unlikely that he was deemed important enough to be considered anyway.

But now what he had thought impossible had happened. He had been summoned. How was he to explain what he had discussed with Madame Pomfrey while his healer's oath prevented him from speaking about a patient's health without his or her consent?

While his mind ran in progressively smaller circles with worry, Jeremy had finished gathering his dark robes and the white mask. The summons was still there, a steady burn at his wrist where the now concealed, smaller Dark Mark was hidden.

Taking a few steadying breaths, Jeremy concentrated on the pull on his mark and spun on his heel to disapparate. In the next moment he stood in a cosy study, a fire merrily burning in the fireplace, candles illuminating rows of books neatly stacked in their shelves. Before he could take in the whole room, Jeremy sank down to kneel on the floor, heart beating much too quickly. His mouth was dry as a desert.

"Get up from the floor and sit down." The voice of his Lord was impatient, so Jeremy stumbled over the folds of his robes in his haste to get up and comply with the order.

The moment Jeremy sat in the wingback chair his Lord had indicated, cold sweat started to bead under his mask. Not even the night he had been marked had Jeremy been alone with the Dark Lord. Now he felt that it wasn't an experience he would search out again any time soon.

The moment a warm hand turned Jeremy's own over and placed the small container of a calming potion – working as a healer one learned to identify the most common potions by colour alone – in it, the healer realized that he had lost himself in his own thoughts in his attempt to remain calm.

"Away with the mask and down with the potion. Neither you nor I have the time to waste with hysterics."

With shaking hands Jeremy did as he was told, and a moment later the calming effect of the potion worked its wonders on his nervousness. "Thank you, my Lord." Jeremy took a few calming breaths and then looked up into his Lord's face who now sat down in the other wingback chair, pouring tea into two china cups. It was a surreal scene, the Dark Lord offering him refreshments.

"You wanted to speak with me, so speak."

Watching as the Dark Lord added three spoons of sugar into his tea, Jeremy took up his own cup and added only a little squeeze of lemon before he started to speak. "Today at work there was a case I was consulted for that I feel is of great interest to you, my Lord." He needed to be careful in how he worded his report if he wanted to avoid the awful effects a broken or even strained vow would inflict upon him.

"You're a healer." The reaction was more murmured than spoken aloud, but the moment Jeremy saw the dawning understanding on his Lord's face, a big stone fell from his chest. Jeremy never had been important enough to know the names of all the other Death Eaters, but he had known that
at least one other healer was part of the group. Severus Snape was said to have been not only the Dark Lord's Potions Master, but his spy, or Dumbledore's, depending on who you asked. A healer had never been exposed in the aftermath of their Lord's vanishing act, but now Jeremy knew that the Dark Lord was aware of the oaths a healer had to take to work at St. Mungo's.

"Effects of dark magic is your field of expertise, correct?" The look levelled at him where he sat with the mask in his lap and a cup of tea held in his hands, was as sharp as the question. "That's correct, my Lord. Most of the healer community regards me as an expert in that field. I certainly am the most experienced in this field in Britain." It was bragging, but as Jeremy wasn't sure how informed the Dark Lord was about these things, it was the better plan to voice those facts out loud than risk his life on spotty information.

"So consultations are quite common?" Before Jeremy could do more than nod in confirmation his Lord proceeded with more questions. "But most consultations probably aren't worth being reported to me. So this consultation must have been something unusual. The consultation wasn't from someone inside St. Mungo's?"

"That's correct, my Lord." Watching his Lord think, Jeremy sipped on his tea. If this was how his Lord was going to ask questions until he had come to all the important facts without Jeremy actually saying anything, then it would work out.

"I assume you normally don't get asked for your insight from that particular source often?"

"In fact it was a first, my Lord. Private Healers, healers from abroad, my own colleagues. That's pretty normal. But the letter I got yesterday evening, just as my night shift had started, was a first. I spoke with the sender in the morning and contacted you just as I had finished my shift, my Lord." And indeed it had been a shock. Madame Pomfrey had been the mediwitch of Hogwarts when he had gone to school there. In fact her work had been part of his inspiration to try for a spot as a healer-apprentice.

Jeremy watched with fascination as the red eyes of his Lord grew wide with surprise and a kind of surprise he normally only saw on children's faces when their very first pain potion started to work. It was always nice helping small children. Once in awhile he took on a shift in the emergency ward just to help a few children and make them smile. The idiots who experimented, or those who shouldn't be brewing their own potions, and all the others injured each day were bearable if he could make one child smile.

"A hypothetical question." Carefully setting his cup down on the small table between them the Dark Lord leaned forward with a twinkle in his eyes. "If someone were to suffer from a dark withering curse, designed to kill within minutes, but delayed enough that the progress seems slowed down considerably, to have it removed later, what would be the possible side effects?"

Now Jeremy's eyes grew wide. Madame Pomfrey hadn't been able to precisely describe the curse she had told him about, to explain why she thought the signs of decline in mental health in the Headmaster of Hogwarts was connected to an exposure to Dark Magic. But this sounded like something that would match. "A withering curse? How far would this curse have developed in this hypothetical situation? And which part of the body should I assume was affected?"

The devilish grin on the Dark Lord's youthful face made a cold shiver run down Jeremy's back. "A hand. After a few weeks, the blackening had reached the elbow."

"Then I would expect that traces of harmful magic would start to circulate through the whole body after the first week. If this state would keep up for a longer period of time, I think the normal longtime effects of exposure to harmful magic would start to show. Dementia-like symptoms, loss
of sense of time, forgetfulness, and things like paranoia and fear, wouldn't be surprising." Jeremy carefully put more emphasis on the points Madame Pomfrey had named in their discussion.

"Thank you, Healer Jugson. Please follow the normal procedures required in such a case. Thank you for your good work, and don't let me keep you longer than necessary."

Recognizing the dismissal, Jeremy stood, bowed, and left the room. Just as the door closed behind him he almost jumped out of his robes because the most boisterous laughter he had heard in quite some time suddenly started in the office he had just left. The healer blinked slowly. It seemed that the Dark Lord was happy with the news Jeremy had brought. It was time to get home, sleep, and shower, so he could be ready for the dinner date he had this evening with the young witch working as a medi-witch on the ward for magical bugs and diseases. So far, the order to find someone and start a family was the one bringing him the most joy of all those he had ever been given.

ooOoo

Marvolo, meanwhile, was laughing and dancing in his office. Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore was losing his marbles. What delightful news. Madame Pomfrey would be forced to bring her concerns for the Headmaster's health in front of the Board of Governors, who would then proceed to search for a new witch or wizard to take over the position. A man not in full control of his mental capabilities wasn't able to lead a school and be responsible for so many children.

It was an interesting hypothesis that the curse might have caused a decline in the mental health of the Headmaster. Of course, there was the chance that there was another cause. But it was worth testing. Maybe he could use Karkaroff for this purpose. The man had been incarcerated for quite some time now, and torturing him wasn't as stress-relieving as it had been in the beginning. Karkaroff was much too resigned to his fate by now.

But before he could start a proper experiment he needed to know all the facts. As Severus had been involved in the process more than any other of his Death Eaters, it probably was the best to ask the Potions Master. He would have to make good notes and probably should write down the curse he had designed, as well as all the facts he had about the development with the Headmaster.

But maybe it would be better if he finished up the other things waiting for his attention first. With a sigh, Marvolo walked back to his desk and sat down. The ritual to move the horcrux out of Henry had the highest priority. Even if he currently had trouble deciding which of his horcruxes to use in the ritual and where to move it to.

oooOOooo

During lunch break, Harry sat with the other Slytherins at the Slytherin table quietly discussing some quidditch tactics when the door to the Great Hall opened. It wasn't such an unusual occurrence, there always a few people leaving early or arriving late to a meal, but when whispers started to spread through the Hall, Harry looked up and around.

"Isn't that your father, Draco?" Theo asked, taking the opportunity to get another portion of green beans onto his plate.

"Yes. But I don't know why he's here. The last letter I got this morning was from a few days ago. He never mentioned that he would come to the school."
The door opened again, admitting a wizard with grey hair and old-fashioned robes, hurrying towards the Head table where at that very moment loud voices started to argue.

"That should get interesting," Daphne said between sips from her cup of tea. "Sit down, boys, don't attract attention."

Reluctantly they all complied and watched with fascination as the professors at the Head Table got involved in a heated debate. "I wish I could hear good enough to listen in on that conversation," Harry idly mused, selecting a fruit pudding for dessert.

"We can probably ask my father." Draco said before he shut up to relish his favourite dessert of chocolate mousse.

The Headmaster was still arguing with what had turned out to be the Board of Governors – Draco had recognized a few of them – when the students slowly started to disperse so they wouldn't be late to their afternoon classes.

"Harry!" the green-eyed teenager turned as Hermione called for him, seeing her and her uncle Xerxes Lestrange standing side by side, while the wizard was holding a rather big parcel under one arm. Curious, he started to weave his way through the other students to his friend.

"Hermione, Lord Lestrange," Harry greeted with the bow required of him, still feeling rather awkward over all the formalities.

"Heir Slytherin-Potter. My nephew contacted me late yesterday to ask if I would be willing to play the owl and deliver a package of painting supplies to Hogwarts. I was intrigued and happy to have an excuse to visit my dear Hermione." The older wizard extended his arm with the package and Harry happily accepted it with a big grin on his face. "Thank you very much, Lord Lestrange. Delivering these for me was very kind of you. But if you would excuse me, I will need to place this in the dorm before the next class starts." With another nod Harry left Hermione in her uncle's company. He had proven to be a decent sort. Hermione was really happy about the discovery of her magical ancestry and that her father got to get to know his uncle. She also was determined to use the power she would one day wield to improve their society. That train of thought reminded Harry of the Society for Elvish Welfare or something, he snorted and hurried to make it to the dorm. He would be able to start on his painting of Hogwarts here at Hogwarts. His chances of getting the painting done in time had increased significantly.

oooOOooo

It was late on Tuesday evening when Cassius Yaxley, the younger, searched for something to fashion a mask out of. He had spent the last five days following Susan Smith, a mudblood witch who had been in the same year as him. He had started this in response to his father's plans to re-introduce the tradition of kept women. They needed targets, women they could capture and keep. Those that wouldn't be missed terribly by anyone if they went missing.

After five attempts to make one of the intricate masks used by the Death Eaters – his heroes since the time he could read – he changed tactics and created a simple bone white mask without the designs he knew were on the original masks. In the heat of the moment, a simple white mask would suffice to hide his identity and intimidate his opponents.

Now he had to hurry so he wouldn't be late to their meeting place where five of the others would meet up with him to go over to the small village where the mudblood Smith lived in a small flat together with two other young women. He shrugged into his robes – stained dark to cover up the marks of a spilt potion – and closed them down the front. They weren't as heavy as he would have
liked, lacking the movement of heavy fabric, but they would do. He placed the mask over his face, moved the hood to conceal his face further, and applied a sticking charm so it wouldn't slip at an inopportune moment.

It didn't take long for them all to apparate into the small clearing Cassius had scouted out over the last few days. It wasn't far from the house with the flat, so it was a good place to start their raid from.

"Everyone here?" Cassius let his eyes wander over the others. Each of them had managed to get dark robes and masks, so they were quite the imposing group. "Remember the plan. We apparate to the house. There is a door at the back and one in front. Two will keep watch outside, making sure they can't run. The others will split into teams of two, one goes in through the front and up the stairs, the other two go through the back door. Stun them, then apparate them out to the clearing and from there to the hut in the woods." They had found a little derelict hut they would use until they had the bitches under control.

All around there were agreeing noises and nodding heads. Splitting the group into teams of two was done quickly. After that Cassius explained the layout of the house and flat to them all in minute detail. It was interesting what one could learn by watching others through their windows for a few hours a day.

"Any questions?"

There were none, so they had only to wait a few more minutes, till the time their targets normally went to bed on a weekday. They would have an easier time when the others were bedraggled and not in a position to defend themselves.

What followed went by in snatches. Apparating to the backdoor of the house. An alohomora to the door opened it without a problem. They sprinted up the stairs, almost tripping over the shoes standing by the door into the flat. Then they were in the flat, marching over to the rooms, led by the unmistakable sound of snores. Before the bitches could properly wake up, Cassius had shot a stunner at that ungrateful whore Susan, snarling into her unconscious face. "Now you'll wish you hadn't declined my invitation, bitch. You should have been grateful to even get a moment of my attention. But no, you felt you deserved better. Pah!" he spat in her face. "I will show you your place, mudblood!"

He apparated to the front door, his captive pressed to his side. Then he raised his wand in the direction of the star-covered sky. "Morsmordre!" A cloud of eerily dark green sparks rose from his wand into the night sky, forming a big skull which opened its mouth to let a big snake slither out, forming the dark mark over the house. Shouts sounding from the surrounding houses signalled that it was time to leave, so Cassius hoisted the unconscious form of Susan over his shoulder and turned again to apparate to the clearing they had come from.

The others were already waiting, the other two bitches – one with red hair, freckles, and skin as pale as milk, the other with dark curly hair and a nice tan – bound on the floor. That had gone better than Cassius had hoped for. His father would be proud of him. For taking the opportunity and for making it happen without a hitch. Now they only needed to get the captives to the hut and feed them the love potion they had prepared in advance. That would make controlling them easier.

With a smug look hidden behind his mask, Cassius apparated. They had thought of everything. This would get them the acknowledgement they deserved, and a nice little bitch to clean for them, cook for them, and tend to their other needs as well.

oooOOooo
With apprehension seated deeply in his stomach, Marvolo walked up to the office rooms of Mrs. Goyle’s practice. She had said he could come by after her normal office hours, giving him an appointment on short notice. In a way he was grateful that she had managed to find time for him, but on the other hand he really wished he wasn't here right now. Talking about what he was feeling, about his problems and what in his past might be the cause for them wasn't something he really wished to do. But he didn't see many other alternatives. Healer Greengrass’ collection of pictures, texts, and other things had been interesting, but hadn't brought the insight Marvolo had wished for. And now, before one of these days a determined mother managed to herd him into a marriage, he needed some answers. And who should he ask? One of his Death Eaters? Before he spoke with one of them about his seemingly absent preferences he would dance a waltz in the middle of Diagon Alley. Dyed pink from head to toe.

There was no one but Mrs. Goyle present, and on the table sat the box he had transfigured on his last – and first – visit. With a sigh and hands steady because he had huge amounts of willpower, Marvolo put his wand inside the box, set it on the table and carefully lowered himself into the seat meant for him.

"Good evening, Lord Slytherin. I'm happy you have found the time to come here again." Her tone was pleasant, her posture professional. Marvolo wanted to run, set the place on fire, and just start talking. It was an odd combination, and it made him decidedly uncomfortable. "Is there some particular topic you want to discuss tonight?"

With this question she relieved Marvolo of opening up the conversation himself. Normally he had no problems talking, getting others to spill their most guarded secrets, but now he felt like words were evading him.

Briefly closing his eyes, folding his hands and placing them in his lap, Marvolo reminded himself that this woman had helped Henry a lot – the young man had relaxed considerably, and Severus’ reports indicated that his son had adjusted to life in Slytherin House quite easily – and that he needed to talk to someone. Talking with a medical professional bound by oaths not to talk about what he said to her was a good choice, better than his other options.

Gathering what courage he had, Marvolo just started to talk. "You're aware that it is expected of a Lord to marry. Sooner rather than later. I have met a lot of people, many of whom were trying to get my attention." One of his hands came up to rub over his eyes. "Not one of them caused a… reaction on my side. So I asked someone to gather some… study material for me. He brought an impressive collection of what could be called, samples of every bit of erotica magical Britain has to offer." Another huff and Marvolo berated himself. He could torture without batting an eye, but talking about sex was difficult. Sometimes he cursed the fact that he had been brought up in a conservative, religious orphanage. While some of the old families tended to be prudish, the muggles had seriously screwed with his head in this. "I studied the pictures and texts with time and in a comfortable setting." In fact he had been wearing some of his most comfortable clothes, had sat near a warm fire with a glass of good red wine near at hand. "But nothing got the reaction one would expect. I surely can see and appreciate aesthetically pleasing body forms. Both male and female. But that's it. Both men and women have hit on me. Not one of them caused even a spark of interest."

Marvolo was aware that he hadn't really asked a question as of now. But Mrs. Goyle sat there patiently paying attention to every word he said, listening intently. "I know that from a healer's perspective on the body, everything is fine. So I feel that my lack of… reaction must have its cause somewhere in my mind. I will need to marry and I'd rather pick a partner… matching with my needs. But without knowing what those are…." Marvolo trailed off, the urge to run from the office right after obliterating the woman sitting there calm as a lake’s surface on a sunny windless day.
"Have you considered that sexuality is much more complicated than just being attracted to either men or women?" Her gaze was questioning and Marvolo just shrugged. He couldn't claim to have thought on this topic for any length of time, really. As a teenager his worries had been elsewhere, later he guessed that his mutilated soul had curbed any sexual desires he might have had. His forays into the minds of others had always had a goal, and their sexual fantasies never had been on the list of interesting topics.

"There are people who only are attracted to those they can hold a stimulating intellectual conversation with. Others like feet. Some need someone to dominate them, or even pain to get aroused. And of course the other way around. As long as all participants are willing, there isn't anything wrong with that. It is even completely normal for an individual to have no interest in sexual acts at all."

Marvolo quietly contemplated that he never had noticed an arousing effect when he had punished a Death Eater, or watched them torture others. "I would recommend that you not put so much pressure on yourself. There's no need to put a label on yourself yet, or anytime at all."

Silence fell between them. In a way Marvolo saw that Mrs. Goyle was right. There was no real need to put a label on his sexuality, or his lack of one. At least not until he was forced to select a partner in marriage. But considering everything, he would be pressed to select someone based on political merits anyway. Nodding, Marvolo conceded her point. "I guess you're right, Madame. I most likely won't be able to select a partner based on sexual compatibility between us anyway."

A sad smile and a shake of her head, was Mrs. Goyle's answer. "The political needs are sometimes stifling. In a way I'm glad that I was not considered worthy of being married off. It enabled me to chose my own path in life." Before they could speak more about anything, there was a pecking sound from one of the windows.

Frowning, Marvolo turned in his seat to look out of the window from where he thought the sound was coming. An owl was sitting on the windowsill, impatiently pecking at the glass. With his frown deepening Marvolo stood, called the box wandlessly to his hand, and opened the box, before he carefully took the last steps to the window. A careless wave of his wand had the window opening, clearing the way for the owl to come in. And the small, sleek-looking bird flew in just to land right in front of Marvolo holding out its leg with a small scroll bound to it.

After he had cast several charms at the scroll – checking for contact poison, curses, and other potential nasty dangers – Marvolo took the scroll from the bird which launched itself into the air the moment it had delivered its cargo.

The scroll was sealed with the coat of arms of the Auror office and Marvolo's instincts were sending him warnings. Without hesitating another moment, Marvolo broke the seal and quickly read the short missive.

\textit{Lord Slytherin,}

\textit{In connection with the sighting of the Dark mark over the scene of a crime you are asked to come to the Auror Department as soon as possible to aid in the investigation.}

\textit{Sincerely,}

\textit{Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour}

With a sigh Marvolo turned back to Mrs. Goyle, folding the summons – it was foolish to think it was anything other than an order – to stuff it back into his pocket. "I fear we will have to cut this
meeting short. But if you are agreeable, I would like to try again next week?" They quickly arranged another appointment before Marvolo hastened to get to the Ministry. A Dark Mark had been seen at a crime scene? He needed to know who had worked against his orders, or who was bold enough to claim something as theirs to use that wasn't. There was no way he could let that development stand.

Chapter End Notes

The season of family gatherings, long dark evenings, and colds (at least where I live ;) ) is upon us. I hope that I will manage to keep my update schedule, but maybe I will stretch it to three weeks again over Christma. We'll see!

Story recommendation: "Hermione Granger, Demonologist" by BrilliantLady it is finished and shows "the Dark" in a way I haven't seen anywhere else

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published on the 17th of November 2017

Next chapter planned for 1st of December 2017
It seems my story is now to big to be converted to mobi format with the sides possibilities.
If you want to use mobi format you could use one of the sides on the web offering to convert different other formats to mobi (like this one: https://ebook.online-convert.com/convert-to-mobi). The other three formats offered by this side still do work. If there is interest I can try to provide a link with each new chapter to an pre-converted file somewhere else.
Please let me know what you would prefer in a comment!
Thank you!

Another year almost finished. I will publish another chapter this year, but will make a longer break over Christmas.

I'm so very happy every time one of you writes me a short or long review, letting me know what you liked about a chapter, your speculations, your ideas. It helps me create this story and keep writing even when I'm tired and feel uninspired :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wednesday, 13th December

During breakfast Severus listened attentively to the discussion his colleagues had, sipping from his cup of coffee with honey and eating his toast with scrambled eggs. Sonja was eating next to him, deeply engrossed in the latest issue of Potions Quarterly. It contained a detailed examination of the effects of dried toad livers over fresh and pickled ones on a certain branch of hair care potions. An interesting read.

"I can't believe that the board insists on having an expert check the Headmaster's health." Minerva shook her head, her lips pinched into a sour expression. "He's as collected and competent as ever!" Severus almost snorted at that and quickly hid his face behind his cup again.

"But you can't just dismiss the findings of Poppy out of hand, Minerva," Filius interjected, arms moving about in his exuberant gestures. "We know that the Headmaster has duelled with dark wizards in the past. That way he came into contact with some dangerous curses. The curse that affected his hand and arm this summer could be a cause as well. I for one would feel better when a certified healer told us that Poppy's concerns are unfounded."

"Poor Albus," Pomona said into the strained silence. "It must be hard to know that your own mind is going to lose its edge." She sounded sad and was almost constantly shaking her head.

Severus had to work not to roll his eyes, or snort. The fact that the Board of Governors had come
by the previous day during lunch to demand the Headmaster undergo a more extensive health screening than Madame Pomfrey was able to execute, was still occupying the minds of the staff. Severus had listened to quite a few amusing rumours circulating around the school. The best one so far claimed that the Headmaster had been seen sunbathing in the nude during the summer, and now the scandalized Governors were calling for his dismissal.

A strong scent of herbs, myrrh, and sherry preceded the arrival of Sybill, with her dramatic, overlarge glasses, her many colourful scarves, and her other usual flourishes. Now Severus had to keep himself in check even more fiercely. He was quite happy with the fact that the Divination Professor only seldom found her way down into the Great Hall for meals. But obviously she wouldn't miss the opportunity for one of her dramatic – and obviously faked – predictions.

With an overacted sigh, the professor Severus detested the most out of all the current staff fixed the Headmaster's empty seat with a mournful gaze. "How sad and dark a fate awaits our dear friend. Only loss and despair are in Albus' future. It's hard on us whose inner eye isn't clouded with the trivialities of the mundane, daily struggles, to know, but to be ignored.” A few students sitting near enough to hear what Trelawney was saying either sniggered or looked on in awe. It always tended to surprise Severus that there were so many human beings who would fall for such bad acting.

Of course, in the back of his mind Severus was aware that he held such deep animosity towards this specific colleague only because she had been the one to speak the prophecy which he had foolishly carried back to the Dark Lord, only to place his one friend squarely into the spotlight.

Pushing his thoughts on those past events – which couldn't be changed anyway – into the deep, dark places of his mind, Severus once more concentrated on the present. He needed to get every nuance so he later was able to relay an accurate report to his Lord. If they would be able to remove the old man from the castle, Severus' own job of protecting Lily's son would be easier.

Severus looked up as the morning post came in with the big flock of owls and the few other birds carrying mail, sprinkling the people sitting in the Hall with small water droplets from the feathers and wings of the birds flying in from the cold weather outside.

ooOoo

The fifth-year Slytherins were still chuckling, and Harry was flushed in embarrassment, because Pansy had pointed out that he still had some dried paint on the tip of his nose as he had arrived in the common room this morning.

"Let poor Harry be, Pansy. You've seen how deep he vanishes into what he's doing when he's working on his art," Theo chided gently, while he filled his plate for a second time. He loved the food at Hogwarts, and the ability to chose what he wished without one of the elves sending him disappointed looks if he didn't take at least two pieces of fruit with his breakfast.

With a curt nod, Pansy made a big show of her effort to stop laughing. They all had seen Harry drawing by now, as he often sat in the common room with his pad of paper and his coal and pencil, drawing plants from 1000 Magical Herbs and Fungi or one of the pets roaming the room. Theo had once suggested Harry should draw a Hippogriff, sending Draco into a fit about savage beasts and that he really would appreciate it if they wouldn't bring up that blunder at every possible opportunity.

They were in the middle of their meal – now much quieter as the reality of an early morning hit them after the fun of teasing Harry had faded – when the post owls came flying into the Hall. Theo greeted his father's owl with a piece of crisp bacon which the bird ate with relish, while Theo released two scrolls from their ribbons on the eagle owl's leg. A big smile shortly spread over his
face, as he saw that one of the letters had been written by Aiden. He loved letters from his little brother. The boy always had much to tell from his classes at the school Lord Lestrange had founded. What pranks some of the others had played, games they had learned, excursions they had been on... Theo wished that there had been such a school back when he himself had been young enough to need to learn his letters. This school sounded like much more fun than studying alone with a tutor.

Suddenly Harry shot up from the bench, shaking in some suppressed emotion that didn't look pleasant at all, and rushed off without a word, leaving his bag and everything else behind.

"What's wrong with him?" Blaise asked of no one in particular, looking after the almost running figure of their Housemate.

Theo left the others to their quiet speculation and took up the newspaper Harry had been reading before he had decided to run off to places unknown. He didn't have to search for long, and the change in atmosphere in the Great Hall indicated that more people had looked at their copies of the Daily Prophet by now. There on the front page, with a ghastly image last seen right after the Quidditch World Cup over a year ago, was the article Harry had most likely read.

With quick eyes Theo scanned the information – what little there was – on the first page and soon came to a conclusion that explained perfectly why and to where Harry had run.

"Stop guessing," Theo admonished the others, folding and turning the newspaper so the others could see. "I would say Harry is on his way back to the dorms, and to his mirror, to ask his father about this."

Quite a few of the others paled considerably. Either because they feared for a family member who might be apprehended after a crime with a hovering Dark Mark above it, or because the thought of calling out the Dark Lord as Harry was probably preparing to do left them with horror in their guts.

Ignoring the angry and fearful murmurs spreading through the Hall, Theo started to read the article carefully. It seemed that the Dark Mark had been cast over a small house containing two flats, one of which had been inhabited by several young witches in an arrangement to share the rent among them. The young witches were missing – presumed abducted – and there were minimal signs of a struggle. The Aurors had been informed after the muggles living in the neighbourhood had called in the muggle equivalent of the Auror Department because of the odd sight of the Dark Mark. The only statement from a Ministry representative was the comment from one Auror that they were working on the case with all due haste and resources at their disposal.

Theo snorted and picked up his and Harry's things. "I'll go back to the common room. Check on Harry. Please inform Professor Slinkhard that we'll probably be late. Thanks." Not waiting for a confirmation from the others that they had understood what Theo had said, he turned and strode from the Hall, following his friend.

This was one of the situations where Harry was prone to make hasty decisions and cause himself loads of trouble. And as a good friend, it was his duty to at least try to talk Harry out of whatever harebrained scheme he might come up with.

Almost out of the Hall, Theo caught the eye of Hermione Granger – Heiress Lestrange – sending her the silent reassurance that he would look after Harry. The small sad and worried smile he got in response sent thrills of warmth through his body. Shaking his head – he had no time for this now – he got rid of the distraction to concentrate on what he needed to do now: Find Harry and make sure he didn't do something stupid.
With fraying patience, Marvolo held onto his polite mask. He was sitting in one of the small cubicle-like spaces that were placed all around the Auror Department – at least he wasn't in an interrogation room – and watched the chaos around him. He had expected some sort of chaos after the Dark Mark had been spotted once again. But this wasn't resembling the relative order of an anthill, looking like utter chaos but serving a clear purpose, each ant knowing what to do. No, the Aurors were running around like headless chickens. If he still had been out to claim wizarding Britain by force, it would have been too easy. No challenge at all.

The fact that he was tired beyond measure wasn't helping his temper. They had called for him to be here some hours before midnight, and now it was time for breakfast at Hogwarts. And he neither had gotten any dinner nor had anyone offered him something for breakfast, or even to drink.

So here he sat, hungry, thirsty, and tired. Marvolo thought it said a lot about his self-control that there wasn't anyone dead yet.

The Auror who had asked him the same questions over and over since Marvolo had arrived late the last evening, was moving back to the cubicle. And not anything remotely helpful, either. Marvolo didn't know who had cast the Mark, or where the girls had been taken. He was boiling inside, incensed that someone had dared use his Mark for their own purposes. As soon as he could leave he would summon a select few of his Death Eaters to get to the bottom of this.

"Lord Slytherin. I hope you will be more amendable to helping find those young witches now than you have been in the last few hours." Marvolo rolled his eyes. This man was full of himself, but that front he tried to project had cracks all over. After all, the Auror hadn't slept at all this night. Just as Marvolo hadn't been able to rest.

"I'm more than willing to help. But you constantly ignore my answers to your questions just because they aren't what you want to hear. And you ignore the advice I have tried to give you. The Dark Mark over the house can be dispelled. But as I can see, you don't believe me." Marvolo didn't manage to keep the sneer of his face. And the Auror's face wasn't friendly either. If they didn't get rest soon, they were liable to kill each other.

Before the Auror could again demand to know where the young witches had been taken, Marvolo felt the mirror in his pocket vibrate. Ignoring the Auror, Marvolo got the mirror out and answered his son's call.

"Henry. You look upset." And the boy did. He was flushed as if he had been running, his green eyes were blazing with anger and frustration, and his mouth was set in stubborn lines.

"Because I am!" was the harsh answer. Then the boy suddenly looked puzzled. "Where are you?"

Casting a look around himself – taking in the pandemonium – Marvolo shrugged before he answered. "I'm in the Ministry, the Auror Department. You have read the morning paper?"

Henry nodded jerkily and after a moment's hesitation switched to parseltongue. ..:I have. You weren't arrested, were you?:.

Marvolo felt the underlying tension in his son at this question. If Marvolo had been arrested, it would place Henry once more into a situation where he couldn't be really sure what the next day would bring regarding his living arrangements. And that in a moment where everything seemed to be working out. Having grown up in an orphanage where kids came and went, each one hoping to find a family, Marvolo felt that he could relate to that dreaded uncertainty. So he tried to manage a
reassuring smile, not so sure that he was capable of producing one that would pass muster. :No need to worry. I really wasn't involved in whatever happened. But I was asked to come here to help with possible inside knowledge which I might still possess. Not that that has worked out until now. They don't even want to listen when I tell them that the Dark Mark can be easily removed from the sky:.

He sighed with an exasperated air, casting the hovering Auror a disapproving glare. A quiet snicker from the mirror drew his attention back to his son. :I will keep you informed, Henry. Most likely I'll have a long and hard day. After I manage to get done here, I will have to see who dared go against my orders:.

:You think one of… them went after the witches living there?:. Henry only hesitated for a moment and then didn't clearly acknowledge the fact that the Death Eaters very much still existed. :Why would they risk something like that?:.

Out of the corner of his eyes Marvolo was aware that another person had come over to hover nearby, but he ignored the incompetent people in favour of focusing on his son, who actually was asking intelligent questions. :I used deeply ingrained prejudices to get those who were influential or just convenient onto my side. Several of them still hold those beliefs close, even with – or maybe because of – the new evidence to the contrary we have found. Appearing law-abiding and pleasant might have lessened their fear of what I might do if they take matters into their own hands:. And he was already mulling over ways to correct that misconception. Maybe Karkaroff would be of use once more, to remind everyone that those who betrayed the Dark Lord would wish for death long before they would be granted that reprieve.

Sadly, it was a possibility that he would have to let the perpetrators be caught by the Aurors, as he needed to be seen as the Lord Slytherin fitting in with society, following the laws, even when he had different opinions on what magic needed to be restricted and what not.

"You will be late to classes, Henry. You can rely on me. I will keep you informed." The looming presence just at the edges of his awareness wasn't going away, so Marvolo felt he probably would be forced to interact with the person. But first he needed to be sure his son was calm enough to go through a day of classes.

"Okay. I will go then. Call later today?" There was insecurity in those incredibly green eyes, and Marvolo tried again to don a reassuring face. Maybe he should practice them in front of a mirror. Until now he mostly had needed other masks – knowing, friendly, polite… – and all of them were becoming easier and easier. But reassuring in a way a parent was to a child, and not in the way of a partner in some political or financial endeavour, wasn't something he had much practice with.

"I will call. Even if it is late, or there's only time for a really short call. Keep the mirror on you." A quick nod from Henry and the boy's relieved expression made Marvolo feel as if he had managed to do what he had planned. Set his son's fears at ease.

Pocketing the mirror, Marvolo turned around to face the little crowd gathered at the edge of the cubicle spaces.

In a glance he had noted the nervous but pleased expression of the Auror who had tried to get him to admit some kind of guilt – Marvolo hadn't felt it necessary to remember the man's name – the calculating look on the slightly lionish looking Head Auror, it all pointed at several more unpleasant hours. "Good morning, Head Auror Scrimgeour. I feel you must be quite busy this morning. How may I help?" Marvolo could watch as contempt and suppressed anger swirled
through the wizard's eyes, and held fast to his pleasant, if tired, expression himself. He was here to
gather information for himself but also to make sure the best for their society was done. And
leaving the Dark Mark hovering over a village mostly inhabited by Muggles wouldn't do any good.

"My Auror here informed me just now that you claim to be able to dispel the Dark Mark, Lord
Slytherin. I would like to know how that is done." The Head Auror was an imposing and
impressive figure and the tone of his voice, the barely hidden threat, was authoritative, as someone
in his position would need.

"That's correct. You really think that someone would create a spell with such an impressive effect
without creating a way to get it down quickly again?" Seeing that the other wizard's patience was
rather thin by this hour, Marvolo hurried to launch into an explanation he had never given before.
Of course there was a counter, but he never had given it out to his followers. He wasn't quite sure
why, but the roots of the charm might have had something to do with it. "Are you familiar with the
group of spells usually called the Nightlight Charms?" At the look of confusion, Marvolo almost
started to chuckle. All who grew up in wizarding Britain had seen or heard of those charms. They
were used by parents to set a small light in their children's rooms that couldn't set anything on fire,
but wouldn't vanish before the night was out either.

"Of course I have. What has that to do with this!" The head Auror was now seriously pissed, but
one of the other Aurors a young witch Marvolo felt had a family resemblance with the Blacks –
probably Nymphadora Tonks, the one Dawlish had told him about – looked as if she had made the
connection. A clever one, that.

"They take on different forms – mostly of pleasant animals and flowers – but are all variations of
the same base-spell, which is why they all have the same counter. Research I did uncovered the
way to create a new variation – unique incantation and all – to link to a design I came up with." Horrified disbelief was the most prominent expression on the faces of all within earshot. "You can
simply cast the counter for the Nightlight and remove it with that."

Marvolo remembered quite well how smug he had felt after realising that the spell used for
generations to ease the fears of small children in dark bedrooms would now be used to inspire fear
and dread in grown-ups. He still thought it was rather clever, and a fine example that any spell
could be bent to do evil with enough imagination and determination.

"We never… a simple Finite doesn't work on a Nightlight… It really is that simple?" Marvolo just
nodded, then rubbed his hand over his eyes. He really was terribly tired.

"It really is that simple. I remember thinking I would need something simple everyone could cast
without trouble. Keeping the incantation in certain circles made sure not everyone could use it. But
I guess as it is rather simple, anyone who has heard of the incantation and seen one of the old
photographs… As I have told your Auror several times already, Mr. Scrimgeour, I was with my
mind-healer yesterday evening. And I'm unaware of any plans and plots to abduct the young
witches. Several of those pressured into service and those that only were loosely associated with
the organisation could have told the incantation to any number of people, who might have told
more… I'm sorry that I can't help you with narrowing the field of possible suspects down any that
way. But what little I could hear indicates that whoever took them knew their schedule and the
layout of their flat. I would start with those that are close to them." It was funny how his oath to do
the best for their community was affecting him and his actions. Even funnier was that he was
pretty sure someone closely related to his Death Eaters was the culprit, but he hadn't once said an
untrue word in that explanation.

"Thank you, Lord Slytherin. I guess it would be best for you to go home. Take our sincere apology
for cutting your appointment with your… healer, short." Scrimgeour sounded unsure over how not to draw attention to the fact that Lord Marvolo Slytherin, former Dark Lord – probably – had just admitted to having a mind-healer.

Marvolo snorted. "I don't recommend existence as a bodiless spirit for over a decade. And living under a curse causing paranoia, leading to horrible actions… let's just say taking up a somewhat normal life takes work." Without a further word, Marvolo stood from his seat, cast a wandless charm to straighten his robes, so he didn't look as if he had spent the whole night in his clothes, and walked out of the Auror Department, his head held high. He wasn't sure it had been the best idea to repeat the information that he had been with a Mind-Healer the evening before. But it was where he had been, and if they decided to question him again, maybe with veritaserum, or another truth-indicating tool, having actually stated the truth the first time would prove valuable. At least he had managed to work in a more plausible explanation for his need of a Mind-Healer than confusion over his sexuality. Trauma over past events would place him firmly with those not even able to speak the words *Dark Magic* in a tone above a horrified whisper.

Now he needed to take a short nap and then decide who might be the actual culprit and how he was going to confirm those suspicions. He had to suppress a yawn and spontaneously decided to take a longer nap. He needed a clear head for what was going to do.

ooOoo

John walked up to Scrimgeour next to Shacklebolt, who had also been called. The night had been hectic in the Auror Department since the moment their Muggle Liaison had informed them that the Dark Mark had been reported to the police by some muggles in a small village. They both were pretty tired by now.

"Ah, there you are! Come here, Dawlish, Shacklebolt. I have a job for you." Another senior Auror walked away after receiving some orders from their boss and the Head Auror's attention was all for them. "I want you to go to the crime scene and dispel the Dark Mark. Lord Slytherin was kind enough to pass on information on how to achieve that. I trust at least one of you is familiar with the nightlight charm?" Puzzled, John turned to look at his partner – they had been a pair for all their assignments for some time now, so the term was appropriate – and to his relief found the other as confused as he was himself. "I know it seems improbable, but Lord Slytherin claims that the Dark Mark is a variant of the nightlight family. Go and check!" Without waiting for their response, the man with the wild hair turned and walked over to another group of Aurors to give out more instructions.

Without the need to discuss what to do next, John and Shacklebolt fell into step and started to walk over to the room reserved for apparation, warded to only allow Aurors in or out.

"Did you know?" Shacklebolt asked, checking his robes, clearly avoiding looking at John at all.

"Did I know what? That the Dark Mark is supposedly a horrifying nightlight? No, I never would have guessed," John snorted. His mind was still trying to cope with this revelation. The Dark Lord never had told anyone that there was a counter to the Dark Mark hovering in the sky. It always had dissipated after some time, depending on some factor they never had figured out. For a while there had been a kind of contest among Death Eaters on raids and missions who would manage to cast a Dark Mark to last the longest. The longest time recorded had been a little over fifteen hours. But because they didn't always get reliable times for the end of the spell, they soon had abandoned the game.

He never would have guessed that such a simple and happy spell as the nightlight charm had been the basis for the Dark Mark.
Shacklebolt only hummed non-committally. As long as they now were working together, neither of them had confirmed the other's suspicion regarding their political alliance until now. John was pretty sure they wouldn't either. It wasn't really necessary, after all.

"I think that if he ever had told anyone, if he had it would have been widely known by now. Just because it's so hilarious. A Dark Lord, using a charm used by mothers all around the world to create small lights for their children at night, to spread terror?" Chuckling they slipped into their warm cloaks and into the room to apparate to the crime scene. They had a job to do.

oooOOooo

Quite a bit away from the hustle and bustle of the Ministry and the excited chatter of Hogwarts, Albus was pacing inside the small kitchen of his hidden safe-house. After the Governors had all but demanded he let himself be checked over by an expert in the damage of Dark Magic, he had hidden behind all the paperwork he had been neglecting until the heaps of parchment on his desk were at risk of toppling over, before he had retreated to this old cottage near the sea he used from time to time to relax away from demands and curious eyes.

Now he was here in equal parts to hide from the worrying looks of Poppy, as for an opportunity to clear his thoughts and decide what to do. Was this a design to remove him from the school? Diminish his influence further, to clear the road for the dark designs of Tom?

Albus dearly wished he could be sure that Poppy never would be involved in such a scheme. But could he be sure? Just before colliding with the worn table in the kitchen, the old wizard turned sharply on his heel to walk back the other way.

On the other hand, she insisted on the examination each year, mostly taking to more or less forcing him to come to the hospital wing, or even walking up to him in his office, claiming if he wouldn't come to her of his own accord, she would search him out. Sometimes she would demand he sleep more, eat more of this and less of that, giving advice on his health as was her job. But until now, the exam never had turned up anything dire.

So if she truly had seen signs of a problem with his mental health, she would have done what now was happening. Informing the Board – as was required when an illness of a member of staff might endanger the students – and contacting an expert to get better insight as to what might be done.

But wouldn't he know if his mind was compromised? His pacing got more frantic, the end of his long white beard moving about in the wind created by the fast movement.

He had always been proud of his clear mind and ability to evaluate its state without outside observation. In fact, he had relied on it to make sure his own faults – the fact he wasn't to be trusted with power – didn't cause him to cause trouble or harm. But if he couldn't trust Poppy, who did he have left?

Was it possible that she had been coerced, or influenced? Maybe some spell, or potion? But he was pretty sure he would recognize the effects of the Imperius curse on someone's behaviour – he had known that most of those claiming to have been forced with the curse to serve Tom had lied – and Poppy always was too careful about what she consumed to be slipped a potion.

So had someone managed to slip him something? Albus shook his head, changing directions near the cabinets on the other side from the table. That was as unlikely as Poppy being under some undue influence. He had his own personal silverware, goblet, and plates. All were charmed so he would see a glow around them if they came into contact with poisons or potions mixed into his food or drink. And he was taking a general antidote to such things regularly. In the past there had
been too many crude attempts on his life – mostly from Gellert's followers after their duel – so he had started to take precautions.

But if no one could have given him anything, and Poppy was just as normal as ever, how was this all possible? Maybe he could ask Severus for a cleansing potion… but no. That slithering Slytherin hadn't told Albus that he was going to take up his position as Lord Prince. Hadn't even hinted at the possibility. Albus had only learned of this because his good old friend Elphias had come by to tell him.

Albus snorted and stopped near a window, peering out to the shoreline and the spray of the waves. Family matters indeed. Maybe Albus should have paid closer attention to his spy. Now the young man had gone and gotten married, only to claim his seat on the Wizengamot shortly after that. Was Tom the reason for this change? Had he put pressure on his Death Eaters? Or was Severus delusional enough to believe that there wasn't any more danger? Albus wasn't sure, and that frustrated him greatly.

Despite all his wishing that Tom somehow was behind this, Albus tried to stay realistic. He had come into contact with a lot of really dark magic during this last summer. He had destroyed a horcrux, and if that wasn't dark magic, nothing was. And he had been carrying that thrice-damned curse around in his hand for far too long. Alastor had been right to scold him for his attempt to use the situation to his advantage. He clearly had done more damage than he could have gained if his scheme had worked out.

Now no longer full of frantic energy, Albus started to prepare himself some tea the good old-fashioned way. Sometimes it was nice to just take the time to make every step of the process the muggle way. A luxury to have the time needed to prepare a pot of tea without magic.

He needed to do research to find a way to determine if his state was as severe as Poppy seemed to believe, and then find a way to appear sound of mind. He couldn't be removed from his post at Hogwarts. If that happened, his only other remaining position would come next, and then who would stand in Tom's way, preventing him from harming their society?

oooOOooo

By lunchtime Harry had managed to calm down a lot. Oddly enough, he had believed Marvolo the moment the other had claimed to have been ignorant of the attack until the Ministry had asked for his help.

Now he was listening to the gossip going through the school. As usual the story from the Prophet had been all through the school by the end of the first lesson. Now, a few hours later, the variations on what was going on stretched from someone new claiming the title of Dark Lord therefore challenging Lord Slytherin, to the claim that the ghosts of those Death Eaters who had died in Azkaban and the last war had come back to haunt them all.

If it weren't for the fact that three young women were missing and maybe even dead, it would have been quite hilarious. Sometimes Harry thought that creative writing assignments – other than divination homework – might make a nice addition to the curriculum. With the strange gossip springing up regularly, there just had to be a writing prodigy somewhere among the students.

He just had settled at the Slytherin table – Draco in a heated debate with Theo over the latest Quidditch news from the league – looking over the available dishes, when Hermione came over to sit with him, ruthlessly shoving the other boys a little to the side.

"Harry, you were gone so fast this morning! I've been wanting to talk to you since yesterday!"
Guess what Uncle Xerxes had to tell me!" The girl was so excited that the manners learned this summer had no chance to stand up to her enthusiasm.

Harry smirked, ignoring the reason he had run out this morning, and filled his plate with roasted vegetables, chicken breast, and potatoes. "Then do tell! You're almost bursting!"

With an indignant huff, Hermione gave Harry's shoulder a little punch, not happy he was teasing her, but not caring enough to leave and not tell him anything. "He not only came to bring the supplies for you, but because he wanted to inform me that the family might get two more people. He received a letter from two wizards – twins, he said – telling him that they think they might be his sons." Harry simply watched her and made the appropriate noises at the right moments. Once Hermione was on a roll it didn't need much to keep her talking. "Uncle Xerxes thinks it's possible. He was travelling after he finished school, as was tradition in many families who had enough money to make something like this possible. He said it was meant to give the young adults the opportunity to broaden their horizons, see new places, learn new things, before they had to take over their responsibility to their families."

Seeing the dangers of a looming tangent ahead, Harry quickly swallowed what he had been chewing, and interjected to keep his friend on track. "So he did more than travelling?"

Hermione blushed, but quickly came back to her train of thought, others around them now attentively listening. "Yes. He met a young witch, he said, and they got close." Her blush got deeper. "The two claim that their mother recently died and they went through her things. Finding his name in one of her diaries, they want to come here and test if they truly are his sons. I'm so excited! I'll get to meet wizards from another country, get to talk to them. Not in passing like during the World Cup, or only other European wizards and witches from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons."

"Where are they from?" Daphne asked from across the table. She had fixed some nice green hair-things – Harry had no idea what the contraptions used by girls for their hair were called – in some small braids, glittering in the candlelight, having an oddly distracting effect on Harry. Funny what he was noticing lately. The way someone wore their hair hadn't mattered much last year, besides noticing that it was either short, long, or somewhere in between. But now he looked at girls and found their hair was drawing his eyes, and the styles other boy's wore sparked the question if he maybe could manage something similar with magic, and if it would look better than his normally wild hair.

"South America. They've been travelling a lot, they wrote. Uncle Xerxes answered them yesterday, to invite them over for Christmas. He wanted to know what I thought, and reassure me that I was his heiress. Some grown men not carrying his name, born out of a liaison with a witch he hadn't known all that well…” Hermione blushed again, suddenly conscious that some might call the possible additions to her family bastards because their parents hadn't been married, and seemingly not sure how to react.

"Don't worry, Hermione," Daphne reassured the other witch, "Having children outside a marriage isn't really all that scandalous, as long as neither parent was married to another at the time. And the way it sounds, that wasn't the case here, was it?"

Harry listened only half-heartedly to the following discussion about bastard children throughout time both in wizarding and muggle society while he ate his delicious meal. It was still a little bit startling whenever his Gryffindor friends – really, any of them – interacted on friendly terms with his newer Slytherin friends.

Here he was hoping that this trend would continue. It was so much better than the alternative.
After his nap – much too short to really help with the fatigue, but already longer than he really
could afford – Marvolo had called a few selected Death Eaters to his office in his Headquarters.
The Carrow twins now were out and about in the seedier pubs to be found in small villages and
Knockturn Alley, listening in to drunken ramblings. He hoped that whoever had been dumb enough
to risk angering him was also dumb enough to brag about it.

John Dawlish had brought a detailed report on what the Auror Department had managed to gather
that would qualify as evidence. Sadly, it wasn't much. But knowing what the Ministry did and
knew was important, so Marvolo had sent John home to get some much-needed sleep.

Over lunch Marvolo had talked with Xerxes and Lucius, sending them out to gather a picture of
how his followers were taking the change, and who might be unhappy with the lack of violence.
Maybe he should have made such inquiries much earlier. It might be not really that useful to call
his people too often, but the opportunity to scan their minds had always been a good one.

He would have to rectify his oversight tonight.

After a few well-placed spells, the big assembly room was clean and prepared for the Death Eaters.
"Barty." Stepping forward and going to his knees, Marvolo's assistant held out his arm, baring the
Dark Mark. With his finger and a small pulse of magic Marvolo sent out the call, before he stepped
back and sorted his robes a last time.

It didn't take long until the first figures appeared in the room with different levels of sound. Idly
wondering what exactly determined the volume of the popping sound caused by apparation,
Marvolo waited for all his people to arrive. He had instructed the Carrows to stay out, so when
everyone but them was there, Marvolo launched into his little prepared speech.

Nagini was slithering around his feet – she finally was finished shedding her old skin and was
much happier for it – adding to the menacing effect he was aiming for. "Someone has broken one
of the few rules we always held dear. Someone is claiming something they aren't entitled to.
Someone will suffer greatly for this treacherous action." The burning fury that had been simmering
in the back of his mind since he had been called to the Ministry finally broke to the surface. It crept
into his words, making the s-sounds remarkably similar to the sounds of parseltongue, sending
shivers through his followers. "You all have seen the news. If the one claiming our symbol for
something I didn't authorise is among those standing here before me, Igor will get someone to
keep him company." Somewhere in the back one dark figure fell to their knees, begging to be
spared. Marvolo had to restrain an eye-roll. Such a pathetic display. That one probably wasn't the
culprit.

"Severus!" The Potions Master stepped forward from his place among the others, confidently
walked forward before sinking to his knees in a sea of pooling robes. Dark eyes behind a white and
silver mask met with Marvolo's own red ones. It did not take much effort to link their minds so
they could communicate via pictures and feelings. Marvolo showed his servant the names of all
three missing witches and after that the image of his own graduation feast, with a feeling of
overwhelming curiosity. Slytherins in their last year tended to bind their ties in a subtly different
way. All three had graduated not that long ago, so it was reasonable to assume that Severus had
taught them and might know something more. Quick images of all three witches – obviously from
Potions classes – came from Severus' mind, accompanied by the feeling of certainty and
thoughtfulness. The order had been given and received.

The next hour was gruelling. One after the other Marvolo called the Death Eaters before him and
searched through their minds. It was embarrassingly easy to follow their desire to keep things
hidden to the memories in question. And he got to see far too many things he would rather not have known. It seemed his people took his order to have bigger families to heart. One thing he was certain of rather quickly was that he certainly was no voyeur. Suppressing more than one shudder, Marvolo made his way through all those he didn't know as well, and incidentally those that hadn't been in his service as long as those he trusted more. The younger ones, those that had been made Death Eaters just months before that night, all weren't guilty. It was when Yaxley tried to run that he knew he had found a lead. A quick stunner and some binding ropes, and the useless wizard was ready to be interrogated.

This mind felt almost sticky, like honey, or tar. And Marvolo had to work his way through delusions until he found the memory of an evening in the dark and shabby backroom of a pub. He was giving a speech and trying to recruit his son and the boy's friends for an effort to help the Dark Lord back to the right path.

"You want to reinstate the custom of kept women? Are you insane?" Of course Marvolo knew about that custom. It really wasn't something only the wizards of Britain had ever thought of. In fact, Marvolo was convinced that the Vikings had brought the idea of prisoners of war to be used as slaves to the islands. All in all, using prisoners as slaves, selling, and even making them for that specific purpose had been part of several economies in the past. But it had been some time since such actions had been accepted practice. In fact, it had been wizards and witches who had realized it wasn't right rather earlier than Muggles did. Maybe the fact they didn't want to come in contact with non-magicals had made this easier, but they never would manage to change anything the political way if they tried to get that practice reinstated.

A long and freeing cruciatus later – Yaxley of course was screaming and writhing on the floor – Marvolo lowly growled to the wizard whimpering on the floor. "You will either go to the Aurors and turn your son in, or you will encourage him to do so himself. You have one day from now before I'll take action myself. Am I clear?" Another whimper was the only answer, but that would do.

"You others are dismissed." The message was clear enough, and they certainly wouldn't do something as stupid as this.

The hall cleared quickly, but it took some time for Yaxley to manage to get to his knees and move to leave himself. Marvolo impatiently tapped his foot. He had promised Henry to call on the mirror to keep the teenager up to date with what was happening. If Yaxley needed any longer, Marvolo would need to do something about it. "Hurry up!" Spurned into action by the venom in his Lord's voice, Yaxley finally managed to get out of the room.

Rolling his shoulders to loosen the kinks caused by leaning forward to look into the eyes of kneeling men, Marvolo walked out of the room to the office. He would need a headache relief potion before he could call Henry. This had been a rather long day. A really long day indeed.

oooOo0oo

They had woken up in a dingy small room, chained to the floor made from a rough, dirty stone. The three of them had quickly inspected the room as well as was possible with their arms and legs bound by heavy chains. The room wasn't big, or all that sturdy, but they couldn't reach the walls from where they were secured, so there was no way for them to find a weak spot in the wooden wall to break through.

Not one of them knew how long they had been unconscious, but judging by the fact they were hungry, thirsty, and needed the loo, it must have been the whole night and probably large parts of the next day.
Susan had been screaming for some time, calling for help, but now they had huddled down together, crying silently, trying to conserve warmth. They only had their nightwear and no heating. It was cold.

"If we had our wands we could be out of here by now!" Jenny murmured with anger, her arms slung around her own torso.

"But if they had managed to miss such an essential part of keeping someone prisoner, I would be rather more ashamed for having been bested by them," Neela snorted and they all had a short moment of humour before the despair of their situation chased the good mood away again.

Until now they had managed to keep their body functions under control, but it was getting rather uncomfortable fast. Before they could start to go over their possibilities – for the fourth or fifth time – the door opened, creaking on its hinges, admitting a figure garbed in dark, long robes, face hidden behind a bone white mask.

The three of them shuffled their positions so they could move better and have their eyes on the figure at the same time. Susan was wary. Who was that?

"There you are, weak, filthy, as dirty as your blood." There was a definitive sneer in that voice. But the way the figure moved, it was clear he – his voice at least sounded as if he was male – wasn’t all that sure of himself. "On your knees in the dirt where you belong. I will teach you your place." The laugh that followed was hollow and eerie. A cold shiver run down Susan's back. She hadn't thought that she could feel any colder than before that man had come in here.

Jenny's taunt of, "You know your robes are tatty, right? And I think the charm you used to get them black, is fading. Not much of a wizard, are you?" was rewarded with a harsh backhanded slap into her face, and a quick kick to the side for Neela.

"Silence! Susan will be mine, as she should have been the moment I decided to have her. And you others know that my comrades are at the moment playing a game of cards to see who gets to choose first." His following laugh was dirty and ended in a snicker. And suddenly Susan knew. That was that Yaxley boy, that pathetic little boy who had been obsessed with her in school. The one who couldn't take no for an answer. Cold dread filled her stomach. She was currently getting a degree in forensic psychology, she knew to what lengths stalkers would go to obtain the object of their fixation.

Two quick hexes from Yaxley's wand had the others stunned, before he grabbed a small vial from a robe pocket and opened it by popping the cork out with one thumb, holding it with the same hand. "Now be an obedient little mudblood and drink this. If you do, your existence as mine – like it should have been for far longer now – will be almost pleasant. But I will have you no matter what you do or think, make no mistake. Now drink!"

He pressed the phial against her firmly closed mouth. The scent of freshly baked cinnamon rolls, damp earth, and broom polish filled her nostrils. She knew that scent! Her eyes widened in horror. All girls in her year had at least once brewed amorntentia, or at least had scented it once. Interpreting who the one and only might be based on the scent each of them would get was a favoured party game at all-girl parties.

When Yaxley pinched her nose so she would have to open her mouth eventually to breathe, Susan knew that there was no way for her to escape the potion. Now she finally understood why the potion wasn't in the regular potions curriculum. It wasn't romantic to dose someone with a love potion. The last clear thought she had was that she hoped the Aurors would find them all fast. It was unlikely they would manage to get out of this by themselves.
The description of the Dark Mark and the way it works in the films let me wonder if there were other, friendlier, versions of shimmering and glittering lights hovering around. The fireworks the twins Fred and George came up with sounded similar. And suddenly the idea of a Nightlight Spell had been born. I hope you like it ;)

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Various Troubles

Chapter Notes

This is the last chapter in 2017, the next one I plan for January 2018. All your support helps me greatly with staying on top of writing and in keeping my planned publishing dates! So thank you all very much! And now on to the story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Various Troubles

Wednesday, 13th of December

Severus hadn't yet crossed the wardline of Hogwarts when his methodical search brought up results. It was a definite advantage to being an Occlumens that he could recall almost everything he ever had experienced at will. So since the moment the Dark Lord had given him the order to find who might know the three witches – and wasn't that mode of communication the most extraordinary – Severus had been combing his memory for hints of the three witches, whom he had seen them with, or any other moment that might be of any value. He had been so preoccupied with this that at first he hadn't noticed that their Lord had dismissed them, or even that someone had been tortured. In the past he never would have gone so deep into his own mind while in the presence of the Dark Lord. It was a sign of how much the man and circumstances had changed for Severus to be able to do that now.

Now he was standing a few steps away from the wardline, his mask safely stored in transfigured form in one of his pockets – handkerchiefs and pocket knives were favoured as concealment transfigurations – and had found probably important information the Aurors needed to know.

With a flick of his hand his wand dropped from its sheath, and Severus cast the patronus charm. It was getting easier and easier with each day he was living with Sonja. "Love, I will have to go to the Ministry, the abducted witches were students of mine. I might have information that will help. I probably will be late." With a flick of an ear the Patronus turned and galloped over towards the castle.

Severus turned on the spot, the image of the apparation space in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic fixed in his mind. He was wearing his dark Death Eater robes, but as he always wore black billowing robes, that wasn't really noticeable without the mask and with the hood down.

Despite that, the wizard behind the security desk paled as he saw the infamous Hogwarts Potions Master striding towards him, the few people around quickly darting out of the way.

"Go...Good evening Professor Snape, sir. May I check your wand?"

With a sneer on his face – this was such a waste of time, what did this check even accomplish? – Severus handed over his wand, waiting impatiently until he got it back, before he strode away without greeting, aiming for the elevators.

It was an irate Severus Snape who stood in the elevator, watching the few flying memos circling
the light, tapping his foot, while he listened to the artificially kind voice announcing the levels and departments.

When he strode into the Auror Department – reminding himself that he was Lord Prince and had every right to be here – he saw a scene that made him sneer even more. The few Aurors present looked like they hadn't slept in days, and the way they moved and talked implied that they had lost any and all hope.

With a snort Severus turned on his spot, searching for an Auror he knew or the Head of this particular department. When he spotted Head Auror Scrimgeour, Severus strode over with confidence in his steps. He had a right to be here, he had information to help three young witches, and helping them was in his purview both as their former professor and as Lord Prince.

"Excuse me," Severus made his presence known. The fact that he hadn't been called or approached until now wasn't a good sign for the state of the Auror force. Maybe what counted as peace had made them lose their edge. Severus remembered only too well how trigger-happy the Aurors had been at the end of the last war.

Turning, the direct boss of the Aurors noticed the figure standing by his side, instantly reacting by standing taller with his shoulders back. It was an impressive shift. "Professor Sna… Lord Prince. What gives us the honour of your visit?"

"I may have information pertaining to the abduction of Miss Smith and her two friends. They all were students of mine, and I recalled that another student was enamoured with Miss Smith. The fact that his advances were publicly and repeatedly declined wasn't really well received by him. I always felt he might be one of those people who can't accept no for an answer." Back then Severus had rolled his eyes and told the boy to not waste his time with someone who obviously wasn't interested in him and whom he couldn't marry anyway as his father wouldn't approve.

Suddenly there was something like life back in the few Aurors that stood near enough to hear their short conversation. Severus could see fire in the eyes of the man standing before him, determination pushing formality and politeness out of the way. "Who was that student?"

"His name is Cassius Yaxley, the oldest child of the current Head of the family. He was a Slytherin, and graduated together with Miss Smith. I'm not sure what became of him, but I recall that he had planned to study for a Cursebreaker position." In fact Severus only remembered vaguely that this had been the boy's plan from one of the many career meetings he had had with the fifth-years back then. It still was one of the more tedious jobs that came his way each year. Crushing dreams during those meetings when students simply had no way of reaching the needed qualifications wasn't his favourite pastime.

All in all, the impression of Cassius Yaxley that still remained in Severus' mind to this day wasn't a favourable one.

The Head Auror waved someone over and gave a nod to Severus. "Please give all information you have to Auror Tonks. She will make the official report. But we will act on this new information immediately."

As that probably was the best, Severus only nodded and followed Miss Tonks over to one of the desks where she waited until he had taken a seat before she sat down herself and got out some parchment and a quill. With an inaudible sigh Severus moved on the chair until he had found an acceptable position to sit in for a long time. If they hadn't changed their procedures much, he would be here for quite some time. At least now he was here as a witness and not as a suspect, like the last time after his Lord's fall. Only the Headmaster's intervention had kept him out of prison then.
Moving his attention from his fruitless musings to the young Auror across from him, Severus started to answer her questions in the hope that it wouldn't take the rest of his evening. He had hoped to play a game of chess with Sonja. Maybe that would still be possible if he made sure the questions were answered quickly.

oooOOooo

With a loud clatter the book first impacted against the wall before it landed with a heavy thud on the carpet. Sirius watched this with blazing eyes, lowly growling in frustration. Why was this so bloody hard?

Hurried steps came nearer, first down the stairs and then down the corridor towards the library Sirius was sitting in, trying to work. The moment the door opened Sirius stood and started to pace, not in the least inclined to see the concerned – or maybe even amused – look on Remus' face.

"Moony, this is bloody insane! I swear mother, that insane bitch, removed every hint that there have maybe been any squibs in the Black family ever from all the books within this house!" To get rid of some of the frustration that had built again over the last weeks, Sirius slammed his hand against the wall, resulting in a sharp sting and a satisfying noise. "And I got the letter from the last experts on enchanted ancestry devices I asked. They say it would be better to create a new one and leave the old tapestry alone. They're afraid of possibly wrecking the thing entirely if they try to repair the damage done."

Remus sat down in the chair Sirius had so recently vacated and watched his friend pace. After a few moments of tense silence, Remus started to speak. "Maybe you should do something else for a while. You've been glued to these books for weeks now." Remus chuckled. "You never looked at any book so long back at school. Maybe with the exception of the one James smuggled into the dorm back in sixth year."

Sirius remembered only too well, and blushed. It had been a magazine bound in a cover to disguise its contents. Before then, all his knowledge about the anatomy of girls had been guessing and whispered speculation. His mother had been stifling in many ways. A relentless prudishness she imposed on her sons had only been one of them. Maybe his tendency to flirt with anyone whom he found at least a little bit interesting had had its origins in his rebellion against her and his father.

"And what would you suggest I should do?" Sirius heard his own frustration clear as day in his voice, and slumped down in a comfortable armchair near one of the many bookcases filled with old dusty tomes.

"Not sure. Go search for a present you can give Harry for Christmas? Blast a few more of those ugly ornaments your mother always used to decorate the house with into tiny teeny smithereens?" There was an amused shimmer in his friend's eyes as he suggested all his ideas.

Sirius contemplated those possibilities. "Well, I'm really not sure what Harry would like to have. He already has a serviceable broom… maybe he would like some tickets for a professional match?" It was really hard to think up good presents for a fifteen-year-old boy. Maybe some records and a way to play them in a magical environment… but what music did he like?

With a sigh he ceased to chase around his thoughts. "I guess I should work on bringing those back into the family who were turned out by my mother. That is something I can do. And I think Andromeda would be happy, and maybe a child of Dora's can take up the mantle of Lord Black after I'm gone." It was a good plan. Because Sirius had serious troubles seeing himself married and a father. He just couldn't imagine living like that.
"Or you can help me grade Harry's latest essay." A laughing Remus threw a scroll of parchment at his head, causing Sirius to duck. Some reflexes just never got lost.

Sirius made a face. History never had been something that interested him. Not even when his godson was writing an essay would he overcome that dislike.

"Or I could write a scathing letter to the editor about the scandalous way they have reported on the abduction of three young witches. Really, the Prophet gets more sensational by the day, Remus."

Remus only nodded. They had already spoken at length about the article and abduction over breakfast. Sirius could see the doubt in Remus' eyes. His friend was again fearing for Harry's safety with his new guardian. "I will repeat myself as often as I have to, Remus. Slytherin might be many things, but he isn't stupid. And doing something like this, when it's likely to be linked to his past and the Death Eaters… that wouldn't only be stupid, it would be dumb. I'm sure he isn't directly involved, and therefore is no bigger threat to Harry than he was yesterday. Please stop fretting."

"I know I'm being silly. But whenever there is happening anything good in my life, there usually comes something along to ruin everything. And now here we are. You've been proven innocent and are free, I have a good job I enjoy, someone with influence is working for better treatment for people affected by lycanthropy… I feel as if there is something just waiting to happen." Sirius could see the anxiety, the fear of what was to come in his friends eyes. As always since he was back from Azkaban, guilt coursed through him at what Remus didn't say. That when he had found friends, one of them had done something extraordinarily stupid and endangered the young werewolf's life. That Remus was still his friend after that was a miracle.

Before Sirius had a chance to come up with something reassuring to say – not that he was even certain he would have found something – the mirror he was carrying around in his pocket at all times started to make itself known. With an apologetic look to Remus, Sirius got the mirror out of his pocket and answered the call.

"Harry!" Sirius greeted, happy to see his godson, even if they talked nearly daily over those mirrors. The boy was already in his pyjamas and seated near the end of his bed. The Slytherin green was still startling to Sirius, but he had come to accept that the current Gryffindors had been extraordinary brats to Harry, even endangered his life. Tripping someone on or near stairs was a no-go for pranks. "It's quite late to call. You should be asleep, don't you think?"

Harry rolled his eyes, not taking Sirius seriously at all. His godson knew him too well. "I'm in bed already, am I not? So where's the problem? I wanted to ask you something."

With a jolt Sirius realized that the same doubts that plagued Remus might be haunting Harry as well. He certainly had seen the newspaper – nothing stayed secret for any stretch of time at Hogwarts – and logically had to know about the sighting of the Dark Mark and the abduction. "Is this about the abducted witches? You know I don't think that Lord Slytherin…"

Waving his hand impatiently Harry interrupted Sirius. "I know he didn't have anything to do with it. I called him this morning the moment I saw the article. He was at the Ministry, trying to give them all the information he had, and by the look on his face he was annoyed because they were acting stupid. I know that he knew nothing about it. No, I wanted to ask something different." And then Harry blushed.

For a moment Sirius was gobsmacked. Harry already knew that Slytherin had had nothing to do with the missing witches? Good. Then what was Harry wanting to ask? Blinking to get a clear head, Sirius asked. "What do you want to know? I'll try my best to answer."
"I know that you didn't like growing up as the Black heir, but I thought that you must have learned everything you would need… and you knew my dad, so maybe you can help me with…” His godson was an adorable, blushing, stuttering mess, and Sirius had a hard time not laughing. But showing his amusement clearly wouldn't do. So Sirius waited for Harry to get his bearings and actually ask something.

When Harry closed his eyes – probably mortified – Sirius allowed a grin to briefly spread over his face, watching his godson take some deep breaths to calm down.

"First I wanted to know what dad did to get his hair under control. Everyone always tells me that I look exactly like James, only my eyes being Lily's. So I guess dad had my hair too?" It was clear that Harry had asked the easier question first, but that was all right with Sirius.

With feelings of nostalgia and a little sadness, he nodded, his hair brushing over his ears and falling into his eyes. "He had the same messy hair. When he was your age he even tried to make the messiness more obvious. Cut it shorter… I remember that he always complained about his mother making him wear it longer than he would have liked. Maybe growing it out a bit will help? I would guess using haircare potions meant to smooth hair out would help too. Why do you ask? Don't like your hair?"

Moving his hand through his hair – making it stand on end even more – Harry scowled. "It's not that, exactly. But I will have to go to several events, balls, the like, during the holidays, and dress up and so on. And… well, I don't want to embarrass my date." And there it was again, the blush. Sirius remembered the parties he had had to go to back when he still was living with his parents. He had hated the parties when he had to talk with the grown-ups, but when he could go of with the other kids it had been bearable, fun even, from time to time.

But he planned to concentrate on the important parts. "You have a date?!" He wiggled his eyebrows. "Who's the lucky one?"

"Daphne – Greengrass – asked me to go with her. And I agreed. She's nice, and I had dancing lessons with her this summer. So I know that I won't get in trouble with her when I have to dance. She also said she's searching for someone else to marry, so I don't need to worry about her trying to snare me, or something." Sirius couldn't keep a small smile from making it to his face. Rambling teenagers were adorable. "And with a date, other girls – or their mothers, more likely – won't bother me, right? So I thought it was a pretty good plan, but now she's started to talk about coordinating our clothes, and I realized she probably expects me to do something about my hair. And I simply don't know how to get it to behave. So thanks for the idea with the potions and letting it get longer."

Sirius nodded when Harry suddenly fell silent, as if he had realized he was rambling. "It's always a good idea to go with someone you know what to expect from if you don't have someone you have an interest in. Greengrass… I remember that parts of that family were thought of as neutral back during the first war. There also were rumours that they, or at least a few of them, had been Death Eaters… But I guess you know her better than I ever knew those Greengrasses that went to school with me."

Harry nodded on his end of the mirror, looking a little less pale now that the blush was gone again. "Do you have any idea what to do about girls I don't even know asking me out to Hogsmeade? I guess I was a little rude the other day."

"You were asked to Hogsmeade by a girl you don't know? Well, I didn't know you were so popular with the girls already." Something like that certainly warranted a little teasing. Nobody had asked him on a date when he had been fifteen.
Harry blushed again. "Stop that! A younger Gryffindor girl asked me. And I told her no. I will go with Luna and my friends. Why would I even go with someone I've seen a few times but never spoke to? People are weird sometimes."

Harry was growing up so fast. For a moment regret flooded through Sirius. Regret that his attempt to get Wormtail back for his betrayal had landed him in prison, making it impossible for him to be there for Harry as he should have been. Not for the first time Sirius wondered if Dumbledore had neglected to do more to ensure Sirius had a fair trial so the Headmaster would be the one to place Harry. He shook his head and redirected his attention to a more immediate concern. "It seems as if you are becoming a man, Harry. Noticing girls? Do you know what you need to know? Don't let anyone pressure you to do anything you're not comfortable with. Or your partner! That's really important! Always make sure whatever you do, that your partner is on the same page and happy as well." How to structure a talk like that? He had gotten the talk together with James, and it had been mortifying. But now Sirius knew how important it was to have real information, not just the stories passed down from one generation of schoolboys to the next.

Harry's face was as red as a quaffle when he interrupted Sirius. "No need, Sirius, really. I already got the talk during this summer. I think once is plenty! I know the contraceptive charm, and also what etiquette there is... really! And if I have questions, I'm sure to come talk with you."

Now it was Sirius' turn to frown. He remembered Slytherin asking him if he was prepared to talk with Harry over such matters. "He gave you the Talk? Seriously? Was it any good?" Harry was adamant not to retell his experience with Slytherin giving the Talk. But the fact that the maybe-former Dark Lord had given Harry a copy of the book Useful Charms for the Young Bachelor – one he and his friends had coveted when they had been teenagers – was much more interesting anyway.

In the end Remus had to break off their discussion, pointing out that it was quite late and Harry would have to get up early the next morning. It was a much happier Sirius who got to bed that night. Speaking with Harry about such trivial teenager things had lifted his spirits.

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Tonks was excited and eager to act. After Professor Snape – or Lord Prince, as she should address him now, who would have thought? – had been in the office to give them what information he had, energy had been back in their actions. They all knew that most crimes of a violent nature happened between people who knew each other. Brothers, spouses... close family and friends were more likely to do each other harm, than total strangers. Exceptions were terrorist attacks, like those that had happened in the last war, and crimes done when a thief was spotted doing their work. Or something along those lines. But abduction?

After it was reasonably clear that Lord Slytherin knew nothing about the abduction, she had been sure it probably was a crime belonging to the first group. With a lead on who might have had an interest in getting Miss Smith under their power by force, it hadn't taken long to find his address in the Floo register.

They were now readying themselves to go after the young man and maybe rescue some young witches – not that much younger than Tonks – as the young Yaxley was still only considered a suspect.

Looking around, Tonks came to the conclusion that the insistence on calling the wizard a suspect was only a technicality. For anything else, the team assembled was just too big. Tonks herself had been assigned to the healers they would take with them, to make sure they were safe to do their work. She wasn't quite sure if she should be happy with this job, or complain that she was
kept out of the way of the real action.

After a pointed glare from one of the senior Aurors, Tonks rolled her eyes but changed her hair from bubblegum-pink to a dull and muted muddy-blue. She stood next to the pair of healers, watching as the first team used one of the portkeys to get to their destination.

Then it was finally time to use their portkey to follow the rest. Tonks landed in a slight crouch, her wand out, already scanning the surrounding area for dangers. She blinked in surprise as she took in the scene before her.

A greying, older wizard in robes of an old-fashioned cut was standing to the side – behind a few Aurors – yelling at the top of his lungs. Between the other noises Tonks just managed to make out a few of his sentences. "No son of mine would ever be this stupid! I can't believe the Hat actually put you in Slytherin! You have brought shame upon yourself!"

Those words seemed to be aimed at a younger wizard, only wearing a nightshirt, his hair sleep-tousled, a witch wearing barely anything standing before him as if she was shielding him. The young wizard hiding behind the young witch was snarling at everyone around them. "What right do you have to invade my dwelling! Leave now!"

All the while the young witch, wielding a frying pan of all things, tried to stay between the Aurors and the wizard behind her. Her words didn't seem to make any sense. "You can't have my Cassius! He's mine! I don't share!" The lone female Auror standing near seemed to draw the most anger.

Well, this was more complicated than Tonks had anticipated. Unsure what she should do, she looked on as one Auror tried to silence the older wizard without using force, while another tried to talk the witch down.

"Ridiculous! That's never going to work," Tonks heard one of the healers murmur and the two stepped around Tonks, aiming their wands at the couple surrounded by Aurors. Two quick stunners and the distracted couple fell to the floor. Smirking, Tonks followed the two healers. She could approve of such pragmatic problem-solving. The boss of this operation clearly was of another opinion.

"Healer Vane! You can't just stun our suspect! You clearly are overstepping the boundaries of your competence!"

Healer Vane cut him off. "Auror Proudfoot, you clearly had trouble getting those two under control. I suspect that at least one of them, if not both, are under the influence of a mind-altering potion or substance. I was within my authority to harmlessly incapacitate them to keep them from harming themselves or others."

"And what substance would that be?" Proudfoot clearly didn't belief the healer's assessment, his voice dripping with disdain.

"Some love potion – maybe even Amortentia – for the witch. She certainly was in the tight grip of jealousy. Quite contrary in such a situation, don't you think? I'm not yet sure about him. But we'll see."

Tonks followed her orders to the letter, not once moving more than a step away from the healers. Not often was there an opportunity to listen in to so much amusing bickering between senior members of the Auror Department, or for one of the older Aurors who looked down on her, the female newbie only there because of her Metamorphmagus abilities, to be constantly teased about his lack of control over a situation.
With a smile on her lips and her hair back to a brightly shining lemon-yellow, Tonks helped to get the two stunned people to the Ministry, while a few others brought the father of the wizard to the Department to be questioned with his grudging acceptance.

Hopefully they would get the location of the other girls fast, so they could get them out before the others involved in this scheme could decide to do something drastic.

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*Thursday, 14th of December*

The newspaper on Thursday morning brought the news that the witches had been found during the night after Lord Prince and Lord Slytherin had given important information to find the responsible people, arresting them.

Harry noted with interest that no names were mentioned, nor were any places. He remembered too clearly the way Skeeter had reported on the Tournament last year, and how all real and imagined facts about him had been paraded out for all to read and gossip about.

Funny how that changed when there was someone with power affected.

After his call with Sirius, he had received a short one from Marvolo informing him that he had found out who was responsible and had instructed the father of the young man to make sure the problem was resolved in a way that the witches were returned safely.

Yaxley senior had connections – the main reason why Marvolo had bothered with recruiting him in the first place – and those now served to shield his family name from the backlash of his son, his oldest son, abducting three witches and casting the Dark Mark over their house.

Those same connections probably had helped the man stay out of Azkaban after the war. Harry snorted, his eyes narrowed in anger.

"What's the matter, Harry?" Theo asked, filling his goblet with milk. "They've been found. That's good, right?"

"It is," Harry agreed, folding the newspaper and placing it in one of the few spots on the table where there was some free space. "But I don't like the way the Prophet reported on the story." Harry left it at that. He was aware that he couldn't risk informing the others about what else he knew. He couldn't tell them that the son of Corban Yaxley, a Death Eater, had used the Dark Mark in an attempt to get the Dark Lord to go back to the old way of doing things. Or that the Headmaster might be losing his mind and was currently missing, probably to evade an examination by experts.

Revealing all the information Marvolo passed on to him would be a risk. Sometimes not knowing something was easier, because back then he hadn't had the responsibility of keeping the information from those that shouldn't know.

"The way they use the euphemism of *kept women* to talk about what would essentially be sexual slavery is sickening," Pansy agreed from behind her own Prophet. "There is a difference." The following discussion between the fifth-year Slytherins was distraction enough that Harry could stay silent, eating his breakfast, and taking his potions. He hoped that Yaxley wouldn't manage to get his son out of the punishment he deserved, and that the Headmaster would either be removed from the school or that the plan to abduct a student wasn't real. And that the test they would have today in Potions wouldn't be too hard.
With a sigh Harry ate the last bite of his toast before he packed his bag to follow after the others.

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**Friday, 15th of December**

Friday on his way to lunch with the others, Harry saw the Headmaster for the first time after that meal when all the Governors had walked up to the Head table. But now the old man was walking towards them with a spring in his step as if there had never been anything wrong enough for him to vanish for a few days.

The discussion between Theo and Daphne about whether it was easier to silence a raven or a toad suddenly stopped, when the Headmaster stepped in their way, his eyes trained on Harry, a smile fixed unmovable on his wrinkled face. The fact that the Headmaster was wearing robin's-egg-blue robes didn't even register.

"Harry, my boy! Please come with me, so we can talk. I promise to not keep you too long, so you won't miss out on lunch." The way the Headmaster presented his request was pleasant enough, but something about the man seemed off. Even without Marvolo's warning – delivered more than once since the start of the week – Harry wasn't so sure he would have liked to go anywhere with the Headmaster alone in that moment.

"What do you want to talk about, Headmaster? Both my guardian and my healer insist that I'm not allowed to skip meals. So if this isn't super-important, I would rather go to the Great Hall for lunch now." Harry knew that this was a change in his behaviour from previous years. In the past he would have waved to his friends, silently promising to tell them everything later, and walked off with the Headmaster, happy to be told anything at all. But back then the friends at his back would have been Ron and Hermione, not Theo, Daphne, Draco and the rest of the fifth-year Slytherins. Not all of them were truly his friends, but Slytherins always travelled in packs, and for good reasons too.

A merry twinkle was in the blue eyes as the Headmaster peered over his half-moon glasses down at the students. "I just wanted to ask how you feel now, living in Slytherin, Harry. There never were many re-sortings, and none in the time I have been at Hogwarts. I'm curious if it is working out as you had hoped. Nothing more." Harry felt the hairs on his arms rise. If someone felt the need to add those last two words, there certainly would be more than just asking how he felt in Slytherin. By the way the others shifted behind him, Harry was sure they had heard it too.

But the Headmaster's supposed question was easy enough to answer. "I like it. Living as a Slytherin in the Dungeons, sir. The rooms are nice, and it's a nice change not to have to climb all those stairs every time when I need to retrieve something from the dorm." Harry made himself smile up at the Headmaster and suddenly felt something brush against his occlumency shields when his green eyes met the blue ones of the Headmaster. Startled, Harry took an involuntarily step back, dropping his eyes to his bag slung across his shoulder, as if to check that the roll of parchment – his notes from charms – wasn't about to fall out.

Harry's thoughts were racing. Professor Snape had told him that there were Master Legilimens out there able to use their ability to dip into the minds of others without the use of their wands, or any incantations. He had even told a story about natural Legilimens able to read the thoughts of all around them without even trying, needing to work hard to close their own minds against the onslaught of strangers' thoughts.

But Harry never would have guessed that the Headmaster would go so far as to illegally invade a student's mind. His trust in the man his parents had followed in the last war had been strained
before, a few cracks here and there – not getting Sirius out of prison, the sparsely given information – but now it shattered into a thousand pieces.

On the outside there was no indication that Harry had just deflected a mind-probe from the Headmaster. "I'm happy to hear that, my boy. It's sad how a few individuals could make your life up in the tower so difficult that leaving your friends behind seemed the better alternative."

Was that a threat? "We're still at the same school, Headmaster. And if you would excuse us, we're going to be late, and I had promised my friends to eat with them." With a polite nod, and a few polite and empty words muttered from the others, their group slipped by the Headmaster and walked down the corridor a little bit quicker than before.

Harry felt that he was trembling, and was so happy right now that Marvolo had insisted he learn Occlumency to help them keep their emotions from leaking over to each-other. If Harry hadn't learned, would he even have known what the Headmaster had just done?


He let his gaze sweep over the walls in the corridor they were walking through. Paintings hung left and right, decorated with green branches from different conifer trees, charmed icicles, and sparkling baubles – the decorations had gone up earlier in the week – before he shook his head and took a few deep breaths to get the trembling under control. "Not here. Later!"

Without further comment the Slytherins surrounded him, starting up harmless conversations about homework, the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend, the holidays, and whatever they could come up with that wouldn't arouse any suspicions should someone be eavesdropping. The tension thrumming through Harry's body didn't leave him until they set foot into the Great Hall. It was unlikely that the Headmaster would do something to him here among all the other students and therefore so many witnesses.

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Albus stood in the corridor looking after the retreating Slytherin students walking in a tight group around Harry. He was perplexed. It seemed someone had taught the boy Occlumency. He hadn't thought that the boy was even capable of such a feat. Harry, after all, was quite young and emotional. Certainly Tom hadn't been able to instruct the boy himself? Regardless of where the boy had learned to shield his mind, even just with the flimsy shields of a beginner of the art, it was unfortunate. The damage was done now. The hasty retreat could only mean one thing: Harry had noticed Albus' probe and recognized it for what it was. It had been a foolish attempt. Why had he even thought that the boy might know something of Tom's plans? It wasn't like anyone sensible would trust a child with important information.

Shaking himself, Albus wrenched his thoughts away from this unproductive path. He didn't have that much time to get done what he had planned to do, before the potions he had taken to bypass diagnostic charms indicating his mind was declining would lose their potency. Of course there wasn't anything wrong with him. But taking the potions would negate any negative spells or substances slipped to him for as long as it took the healers to give him a clean bill of health.

So with a spring in his step, Albus walked the path the group of students had taken only moments before, intent on reaching the Great Hall before lunch ended.

At first his entrance through the big door didn't garner much attention, giving him the time to search the sea of students for Harry and those that had been with him. They were seated at the
Ravenclaw table together with Miss Granger from Gryffindor and a blonde girl from Ravenclaw who looked supremely surprised. They were talking quickly, Harry and a few of the others looking quite pale.

Ignoring that problem for the moment – he always could claim that the sensation Harry might claim to have felt was a mere imagination of someone just starting to learn that complex art – Albus strode confidently up to his place at the head table, smiling genially as his old friends and younger colleagues spotted him.

"Albus!" Poppy exclaimed, quickly standing from her place, food on her plate forgotten. "We've been trying to reach you! Where have you been?" By the time Albus had reached the steps to the dais, Poppy had rounded the table, wand in hand, as if she planned to cast diagnostic charms at him right here in front of the whole student body.

"Poppy!" Albus aimed for a light chiding tone. "No need to get quite so worked up! I merely took a few days to sort a personal matter." He had not informed Minerva of his absence, but he was sure she hadn't had any trouble taking up his responsibilities. "Now I'm back. What was it you wanted to speak with me about?"

Of course he knew what her fretting was about, but he just kept smiling, walking around her and the table to get to his seat. He was going to eat lunch – or attempt to – before she dragged him off to be poked by a bunch of healers. There was cauliflower today and he loved cauliflower. With the butter sauce and potatoes, they made for a fine meal.

"Albus!" Poppy called out with a scandalized expression on her face, causing him to chuckle. "You will come with me after we have eaten. Do you hear me? And no skiving off this time!"

As this matched wonderfully with his own plans, Albus just nodded, sitting down, throwing his beard over his shoulder, reaching for the potatoes with one arm.

It seemed as if something was going his way for once.

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"He did what?" Hermione whispered furiously, something like fear in her brown eyes.

"It felt as if he was trying to get a look at my thoughts. Not my memories, but what I was thinking at that exact moment." Harry felt shaky still, even now, sitting between his friends at the Ravenclaw table, neutral territory between his friend from Gryffindor, Luna, and all the Slytherins almost glued to his side.

"But how?"

Before Harry could start on an explanation of what Legilimency was, Hermione's mouth fell open into a surprised O, making it clear that she had just remembered something. The things she had read and remembered were scary sometimes. "The Headmaster is a Legilimens? But it's illegal to read somebody's thoughts without their consent! I know that for a fact!" Hermione was flustered and looking around as if she were trying to find a reason that she could accept as good enough, for why the Headmaster would do something like that. Harry noted with a little satisfaction that it seemed to be difficult for his clever friend to come up with an explanation.

Harry noticed the Headmaster stepping into the Great Hall when Theo leaned in a little more. "Give it up, Granger. There is no good reason for the Headmaster to peek into the mind of a student. I guess it's his blatant prejudice against any and all Slytherins at work here."
Hermione hadn't much ground to argue about that one. It was pretty clear that the Headmaster had a tendency to short-change the Slytherins whenever he had a chance. In one of many discussions, Theo had brought up their first year and how the Headmaster had waited for literally the last moment before he had pulled the rug from under the Slytherins' feet. It had only taken a moment for Hermione to realize how hard that must have been on the first-year Slytherins, to come to the Feast knowing they had won, only to have it taken from them the way the Headmaster had done back then.

Hermione chewed on her own lip, looking conflicted. "The references I've seen only mentioned that it was illegal to use Legilimency on someone without their consent. How were you able to sense it? Are you sure that he really did try…" The hard look in Harry's eyes killed whatever Hermione wanted to say right in her mouth.

"Just be sure to avoid eye contact. It will prevent him from gaining access," Harry said grimly. He needed to call Marvolo as soon as possible to inform him of what had happened. Hopefully he wouldn't ban Harry from going to Hogsmeade this weekend. He had been looking forward to it for days now. And he needed to get some small tokens as presents for his friends.

"How did you learn to protect yourself from Legilimency?" Now Hermione had abandoned her tries to defend the Headmaster and her thirst for knowledge made itself known. Draco rolled his eyes behind her back. He had stopped the worst of his teasing and bickering since Hermione had been named heiress Lestrange, but still had trouble accepting her unrelenting quest for ever more knowledge.

Luna, stirring her stew absentmindedly, answered in her usual dreamy voice. "It's hard to learn Occlumency without the instruction and help of a Master. Father tried to help me learn, but we didn't get very far." Harry gave her a calculating look. Judging by what Professor Snape had told him, Occlumency was an obscure art because it was almost impossible to learn it without proper instruction and a Legilimens to help with practice. There weren't many Master Legilimenses around most of the time, and fewer people still were willing to let a stranger into their heads as was needed to learn effectively.

"My instruction started with meditation," Harry explained to the crestfallen Hermione, as always unhappy with knowledge that might be unattainable for her. "I'm sure you can start with something like that, and then ask your uncle for more help?" Harry was almost certain that Lord Lestrange would be able to either ask Professor Snape for his help or to find another master to instruct his heiress. If there was someone with the self-discipline needed to master this, it would be Hermione. At least Harry was pretty sure she would have an easier time of it than he himself had had.

"I've had instruction in meditation as well," Daphne added to the conversation. "Mother always said it was a good way to pass boring parties and endure the most dreadful of guests." Laughter followed this explanation, given with a roll of blue eyes and a mock shudder. The eerie mood so broken, the rest of lunch passed rather pleasantly. But Harry didn't forget what the Headmaster had tried to do, firming his resolve to call Marvolo as soon as he was back in the dorm after classes let out.

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It was quite early – he just was dressing for dinner – when the mirror sitting face down on the dresser started to buzz. With a small frown – why would Henry call now? – Marvolo picked the mirror up, buttons on his shirt only half done up, answering the call.

"Henry, are you well?" The boy looked anything but. He was pale, but his cheeks were flushed, his eyes were bright, but looking around nervously, the moving background indicating that Henry
wasn't sitting down but pacing, probably in his room.

"Yes… yes I'm well. Frightened a little, nervous, confused, but well." Henry paced, the candlelight flickering in the draft his fast pacing created.

Waiting for Henry to continue, Marvolo carefully walked backwards until he sat on the edge of his bed, Nagini hissing, annoyed at being jostled. When the boy just kept pacing, Marvolo prompted him. "Why do you call before dinner has even begun? Normally you call after you are finished with whatever you had to do for the day. And didn't you have the Defence Club today?"

With a huff Henry let himself fall down into a seat – probably onto the bed – and nodded slowly. "Yes, we had. It went well. No, what I need to tell you happened just before lunch." The boy took a deep breath and obviously braced himself. "On the way down to lunch we met the Headmaster today. He asked a few pointless questions, wanted me to go with him – alone – and then asked me how I was acclimating in Slytherin. And I'm sure the moment I met his eyes, the old man tried to read my mind. I quickly broke eye contact, and then we walked away. But now your warning sounds much closer, more threatening. I wouldn't have thought he would do something like that… despite everything I've learned since the summer…" Fisting one hand agitatedly into his unruly hair, Henry huffed again, his eyes seemingly resigned to the troubles he was constantly faced with.

"It can be hard to let go of past impressions of people." Marvolo always had been dismissive of others, disregarding them. There had been a few instances where he had had to struggle to accept that they were more cunning and capable than he had thought. Or that a muggleborn witch could hold her own against him, even if only for a short time. He'd never had to endure the agony of losing someone he had held in high regard, to the depths of betrayal by their hands. His expectations had always included that possibility, but he imagined that it would be hard. Realising that someone you thought was a hero in fact had more of a villain than could be ignored.

"I think you will find that the Headmaster was committed to St. Mungo's this evening for a time of treatment against the effects of exposure to Dark Magic. At the moment it looks like the effects might be reversible, and the old man allegedly went willingly. For the moment Professor McGonagall will take over the duties of Headmistress." The relief on his son's face was so obvious it only illustrated the distress the boy had been in. "I'm sure I don't need to remind you that none of this can reach the ears of others from your mouth before the official announcement is made."

Henry huffed again, rolling his eyes with a playful smirk on his face, he seemed to find it amusing that Marvolo had reminded him to keep it secret by telling him that he wouldn't remind him. "So there's no reason for me to stay in the castle tomorrow? It's a Hogsmeade weekend."

Marvolo smiled a little evilly at that, only slightly dimming the hopeful smile on Henry's face. "I think you can go if you agree with me tagging along. I would even say that being in the village and not the almost empty castle is safer anyway. I will meet you and your friends at the gate to Hogwarts' grounds when?"

"We'll go right after breakfast. But I guess we won't get up all that early. So, around ten in the morning?" Henry sounded unsure, but if that was because he wasn't sure when he and his little friends would be ready to leave, or because he didn't know how they would react to find Lord Slytherin accompanying them.

"I will aim to be ready then. Give me a call on the mirror when you leave the castle. I will apparate then." That sorted out, they spoke about inconsequential things until someone knocked on Henry's door calling him to come to dinner. Then they quickly ended their call.

With a sigh Marvolo finished dressing. It seemed he would have to change his plans for the
following day. But keeping his heir safe was more important than a breakfast meeting with some Lords who were likely to agree with him anyway. They all claimed to hold family above all. They should understand. Or he would make them understand.

Chapter End Notes

I wish you all a few happy days, a good start into the next year, and good health!

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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周六，12月16日

他发现自己异常紧张。他正打算向自己的朋友和同学寻求建议。没有什么好害怕的，也没有什么可羞愧的。也许当他们还在一年级的时候罗恩会因为他的问题而大笑，但现在他的老朋友和哈利一样关心给他留下好印象。虽然斯莱特林的其他五年级的学生不会嘲笑哈利。或者至少哈利在说服自己他不会。在去其他人宿舍的走廊上哈利用最后的一口气，抵抗着与巨魔的战斗，同时对这个感到非常可笑。他敲门并打开门的时候听见了里面叫他进来的声音。

“哈利！这么早到真是惊喜！你为什么这么早来？”西奥从他正在扣衬衫的时候回答。他之前说过他们要在公共休息室见面的。“是的，”哈利点点头，虽然他周围其他男孩的早晨例行公事只在他意识的边缘。他看到一串不好的笑话正要从他朋友的舌尖上冒出来，所以哈利赶紧解释了他需要建议的原因。“我想今天去霍格沃茨拿到一些头发护理药水来控制下我的头发。因为达芙妮会喋喋不休地抱怨我不尝试。所以我需要你的建议看下什么样的工作，我能在尝试前得到，因为如果不行的话我还有时间换种不同的东西。”

哈利稍微有些害羞地缩在最近的封闭木箱上，避免打扰其他人。

“我帮不了你，”西奥说，微微一笑。他的头发天生就很好。”

哈利突然有一种想吐的冲动，但幸好他没有真的这样做。“不是每个人都能像你那么秃头，西奥。”

“我们知道了。”哈利点了点头，他只是隐约意识到其他男孩在说他们的早上例行公事。他姨妈和姨丈有访客时，哈利就被赶进壁橱，或者——后来——楼上的房间。但他姨丈被迫打扮——他表弟的言辞非常清楚的表明他讨厌打扮得体——因为他足够聪明知道自己得到了一些好处。例如，薇尔莉特的妹妹常来时给她的侄子一些钱。

终于呼吸了一口气，不时地抵抗着一个巨魔，哈利敲门并打开门，听见里面有叫他进来的声音。

“哈利！这么早到真是惊喜！你为什么这么早来？”西奥从他正在扣衬衫的时候回答。他之前说过他们要在公共休息室见面的。“是的，”哈利点点头，虽然他周围其他男孩的早晨例行公事只在他意识的边缘。他看到一串不好的笑话正要从他朋友的舌尖上冒出来，所以哈利赶紧解释了他需要建议的原因。“我想今天去霍格沃茨拿到一些头发护理药水来控制下我的头发。因为达芙妮会喋喋不休地抱怨我不尝试。所以我需要你的建议看下什么样的工作，我能在尝试前得到，因为如果不行的话我还有时间换种不同的东西。”

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“Well, I can’t help you there,” Theo said, smirking. “My hair is naturally well behaved.”

哈利有突然地冲动想要吐，但幸好他没有真的这样做。“不是每个人都有你那么秃头的头发，西奥。”
"He is right about that, Theo. So step aside and let someone with an inkling of common sense take over," Draco said with more haughtiness in his voice than he usually exhibited when in relatively private situations. "Come here!" the blond boy commanded, waving Harry over to his own bed. "I need to take a closer look at your problem."

It felt silly, but Harry complied, walking over to the other boy’s bed, sitting down on it at Draco’s direction.

“You could try Sleekeazy’s. But if you want to go for a less drastic change, you could try the newer Pompouse-Pomade potion that is sold in the Apothecary at Hogsmeade. With that many cowlicks, it’s hardly a wonder your hair resists being styled.” Draco had spoken with conviction and now Harry was contemplating his choices. Normally he didn’t have to cut his hair often. But the short haircut Aunt Petunia had insisted on really wasn’t flattering at all. It just didn’t work with his hair. At all.

“Do you think letting my hair grow some would help?” Harry asked the room in general, looking over the boys in various states of dress, or undress in Goyle’s case, who just came out of the bathroom where he obviously had showered.

“It can’t do any worse when it’s longer,” Blaise claimed, only sending Theo into a fit of chuckles.

“Now you’ve jinxed it!” Theo laughed, stopping in the middle of tying his tie.

The conversation – if one could call it that – dissolved into banter after that, until they all were ready to go up to the Great Hall for breakfast. Harry now had a plan, and felt better for it.

OOOOOOOO

It was a group of bundled-up teenagers that met at the doors to the grounds. It was lightly snowing, the air freezing cold. It was a hard winter day, and all of them, as well as all the others around them, were buzzing with excitement.

The moment they stepped out of the castle, Harry got his mirror out of the pocket of his cloak. Careful not to drop it, as the mittens he was wearing were hindering his hand movements a little.

“What are you doing?” Ron wanted to know, stuffing his hands into woollen mittens, probably knitted by his mother.

“Calling…” For a moment Harry hesitated. How should he call Marvolo in this mixed company? With the Slytherins he always called him father, claiming him and a little bit more security, but when with Gryffindors he had called him his guardian grudgingly, because they all had so many deep-rooted opinions on him. But now, there were Luna, Ron, Hermione and Neville, Draco, Theo, both Crabbe and Goyle, Daphne, her little sister Astoria. A mixed group. In the blink of an eye Harry made a decision. “...my adoptive father. He insisted that he come along today if I wanted to go. Arguing wouldn't have done anything. So I'm telling him that we're on our way, and he will meet us at the gates.”

Hopefully Harry would manage to slowly help his friends accept that he was happy now. It was still tense sometimes, and he wasn’t always sure that he really should feel like he did, but Madame Goyle was helping him cope with that, to work on being happy, being himself.
“That sucks!” Was Ron’s only reaction. Either he hadn’t heard how Harry had called Marvolo or he had tried – rather successfully – to pretend that he didn’t care.

So he made the short call before turning back to his red-headed friend. “It’s better than being stuck at the castle!” Harry laughed, shoving Ron a little off course, starting a short snow fight, bringing colour to all of their cheeks, even as some of the Slytherins and Hermione tried to stay out of it.

When they stopped a few moments later, they took up their walk down to the gates again. “And it really isn’t quite safe for me to be out alone. Fenrir is still at large. Then this thing with the young women being abducted, Death Eater wannabes… and then there are still the just generally crazy, or the criminals out for money…” Harry trailed off, shrugging. And before Ron could formulate a response to that, Harry felt his left hand seized and turned to see who was walking at his side.

Luna smiled serenely up at him, her blonde hair sticking out from under a light blue hat decorated with what probably were dried pieces of fruit and feathers from different birds. “Thanks for asking me along. It’s really nice to have friends.”

Harry nodded. After all she was right. Having friends was great. But why had she captured his hand? With a bemused expression and a curious feeling in the pit of his stomach, Harry turned to look forward again – he didn’t want to slide in one of the piles of snow last night’s storm had created – slowly swinging their linked hands between them, their friends around them making plans on where to go first.

ooOoo

It didn’t take long to grab the warm cloak, his scarf, a pointed hat – with the way the weather was, one would be required – and gloves from fine leather and fur. A few moments later he was outside the anti-apparation wards and spun on the spot. And just as Marvolo had thought, it was snowing, the thick layer of snow crunching under his booted feet. It was a fine day just before the winter holidays would begin. In a way he was happy to get Henry back home, spend a little more time with him.

It was funny how much had changed since the summer. Their daily talks over the mirrors really had helped to create a feeling of family between them. At least Marvolo thought it was what family should feel like. He admittedly hadn’t much experience in that area of life.

Soon the first students walked past him, throwing him curious glances. Some of them walked faster, as if wary of him, not really an unreasonable reaction to a strange man standing at the gates of a school. Then he saw a mixed group of students, easily recognized by their House-themed scarves, walking down the path. A smile stole onto his face. It seemed so easy for his son – it still felt really good to think that – to bridge the normally existing chasm between Gryffindor and Slytherin Houses. And he didn’t even try. What Marvolo would have done if he had been able to gather people around himself so easily. Well, he had gathered people easily enough. But they all had shared the same interests, the same background. The people Harry had around himself were different in so many ways. Was this the so-call power that he himself didn’t know? In the end it was inconsequential. Marvolo had no plans to make anything out of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

When the teenagers reached the gate, Marvolo took a step forward and greeted them. “Good day! I hope you’ll still have a good day with an adult trailing behind you!” That got a few shy laughs from the group and broke the ice. When Henry walked past him, Marvolo briefly laid his hand on the
boy’s shoulder in greeting. He got a smile in return, and from the girl walking next to Henry, holding his son’s hand – that was unexpected, he would need to get information on her – he got something that looked like a confused or dreamy smile.

Marvolo tried to make his presence as unobtrusive as he could. He was here to make it possible for his son to enjoy the outing with his friends, not to stifle any joy that would come from such a day in the village.

Once again Marvolo couldn’t help but compare today’s Hogsmeade with the one he had known from his own youth. Most of it was exactly the same. The Three Broomsticks was still there, no new houses had been build. But the booth just outside of Honeydukes was new. It was decorated in the most garish colours, with moving holiday crackers exploding again and again.

The children quickly noticed that new oddity as well, and their course changed so they were walking in that direction. It was slow going, as the mass of students consisting of those with the same destination and those that were just crossing the path they were walking was so big.

“Is that Fred and George?” the youngest Weasley boy asked, standing on tiptoes in an effort to look over the heads of all those walking around. “What are they doing there?”

“Looks like they're selling something,” Lucius’ son drawled, probably rolling his eyes by the sound of it.

“Yes. I know that!” The red-head sounded annoyed. “But what?”

“Really, Ron. Just look at the banner they've put up.” That was the Muggleborn girl, Granger. She sounded as if she were rolling her eyes as well. A sentiment Marvolo could easily agree with. It wasn’t that hard to deduce what the Weasley twins were selling at their probably temporary booth.

Finally they managed to get to the booth, where they could finally see that there were three teenagers manning it. The red-headed twins known beyond Hogwarts as pranksters extraordinaire, and a boy their age with dark skin and dreadlocks. They were calling out the benefits of their merchandise and demonstrating now and then how the Christmas crackers – because that was what they were selling here – were working.

When the unknown boy and one of the twins pulled at the opposing ends of a cracker, first there was a mighty boom to hear, then a pink cloud of smoke smelling of violets came out and drifted over the watching crowd. When the two pulling it became visible again, the crowd started to laugh. They both had been dyed pink and were wearing frilly hats.

“Buy the best Stealth Christmas Cracker you have ever seen here! Slip them in among the regular ones, and watch in amusement as your family and friends get dyed the most hilarious hues! Only a Sickle apiece! The colour you buy is the colour you get!”

For a moment the picture of Lucius Malfoy dyed a deep toad green flashed through Marvolo’s mind, and he stifled a small laugh. It would certainly be hilarious. And totally juvenile.

.:Don’t dare to bring such things to our festivities!: Marvolo hissed to his son, who eyed the offered selection with obvious interest. There was no way that he could allow such indignities to happen during his own party.

.:I actually thought that Sirius would love them: was the unconcerned reply delivered with a cheeky grin over the boy’s shoulder.
To that all Marvolo could do was nod. Sirius Black certainly would find those abominations funny. But the man wasn’t really all that mature. At least not when it came to pranks, jokes, and the like. “As long as they don’t make an appearance during the small event that we’ll be hosting. It’s your money to spend!”

So Henry made his way over to the front of the crowd, Marvolo keeping an eye on him and the surroundings. It was hard to keep his eyes practically everywhere and not be too distracted by the people milling about. That there still was a constant stream of snow falling from the sky only made the endeavour more complicated. But Marvolo felt it was worth it.

After most of the group had purchased at least a few of the crackers from the Weasley twins – even Lucius’ son had bought a few, he had have to keep an eye on that – the teenagers split up into smaller groups. Miss Granger, Henry and the girl still holding onto his hand, Nott’s son, and a few others wanted to go to the book store. Weasley, the Longbottom boy, and a few others preferred the joke shop Zonko’s, or the sweets shop as their next destination. After agreeing on the Three Broomsticks as a meeting point for lunch, the several now smaller groups separated.

By the end of the day they had been in each of the shops. Henry had bought some sweets at Honeydukes, asking the girl at his side – Luna was her name, as Marvolo learned during the day – what her favourites where. Not really a subtle attempt at flirting, but it seemed to have worked out rather well. The girl had smiled a little brighter as Henry had handed her a mixed bag of the strangest candy Honeydukes had to offer. The girl really was an odd person.

When it was finally time for the children to go back to the castle, Marvolo was more than happy that he had offered this to Henry. The boy had been laughing, interacting with the other teenagers without the hidden fear Marvolo still could remember so well from his own youth. It seemed that Henry didn’t feel the need to constantly question the motives of the children around him. And he still was careful with whom he spoke. Maybe he would be able to find a good balance, one that Marvolo himself was still searching for.

ooooOOoooo

Monday, 18th of December

It had been a few days since the young witches had been freed. A public trial for all the young wizards who had been involved would be held right after the turn of the year. Most likely they would be sentenced to life in Azkaban, if all the rumours of what they had done and planned to do proved to be true. But other than that, Marvolo knew that there was more to be done. Because the young wizards hadn’t acted on a whim. The idea to kidnap the witches hadn’t even cross their minds until Corban Yaxley had spoken to them. Planted that vicious and useless idea in their heads, leaving them to their own devices for too long. That wizard wasn’t a leader. A leader would have known that the young men had been desperate to do something. Stupid or lazy enough to not think of something to do on their own, but also desperate enough to take matters into their own hands once there had been even a shadow of a plan.

The idea could have been something Marvolo would have had used in the past. But he never would have let them stew in that idea without guidance. But Corban Yaxley had done so, and now there was trouble. The man clearly had outlived his usefulness.
It had taken some time to prepare everything – the fact that the Aurors now had a spell to test who had touched something made things just a little bit more complicated – but now he was ready to make sure that this particular dunderhead wouldn’t be around to throw Bludgers into his plans any longer.

The small phial of poison securely held in his pocket, Marvolo apparated to the edge of the wards around the relatively small manor that had been in the Yaxley family for several generations now. With a strong disillusionment charm on himself, Marvolo didn’t hesitate to pass the boundary of the wards. After all, the wards around all of his followers’ homes were set to let him pass. More often than not, the fathers of the current owners had incorporated those changes. A quick spell revealed that nobody was home... well, expect the man he had come to punish, and the elves living here.

After a quick detour through the kitchen to cast sleeping spells over all the elves – he wouldn’t repeat that particular error ever again – Marvolo walked silently through the halls, following the directions of a simple point-me spell. It wouldn’t have been hard to guess where he would find the current Head of the Yaxley family, but guessing was just that, and Marvolo liked to be sure.

When the Dark Lord reached the door to the men’s smoking room next to the big room usually used for dinner parties and the like, he could hear the grumbling complaints of a drunken man from inside. Or maybe an angry man just going about getting drunk. Either way, he was at his destination. Time to dole out a just punishment.

Marvolo dropped the disillusionment charm, becoming visible again. After a deep breath and setting his face into the stern lines of a disappointed Lord, he pushed the door open without touching it directly.

He was wearing gloves of the kind muggle healers used – he had conducted extensive tests with different barriers and the new spell; these were the least restrictive that still worked – so he wouldn’t have to be overly careful not to touch anything. This should look a certain way once the Aurors showed up. His name couldn’t be connected to this in any way.

“My Lord!” Surprised, Corban jumped up from his seat, jostling the small end table of dark wood next to him, causing the tumbler of amber liquid to fall to the floor. Before Marvolo could start to speak, the other wizard had taken the few steps separating them, and had fallen to his knees, his hands raised beseechingly. “Thank you, my Lord! I knew you would help me get my son and heir back! When will we start? Who will go with us?”

Internally Marvolo felt startled by this unfounded conviction that he was here to lead a raid on Azkaban just to free some spineless idiots. On the surface, not one hint of his confusion showed. Maybe the man had taken some recreational potions to cope with the stress. There wasn’t really a good explanation for this display otherwise.

“My Lord!” His hard voice obviously managed to shock Corban out of his happy haze.

“My Lord? Because they were captured doing your work, my Lord! They were doing what was right!” The disgusting wizard spoke with fervour, but there was a spark of fear in those old eyes.

“Is that so?” With a little step back and to the side, Marvolo walked around the kneeling man, waving his wand to remove the spill and straighten the table. He really would prefer not to be touched by that man. Who now looked positively bewildered, half turned, still kneeling on the ground.

“Did I know of this plan?” Marvolo asked with deathly calm, his red eyes piercing the flushed
wizard.

“No, my Lord. The young people acted a little hasty. I had planned to inform you of my idea, my Lord. Get your approval…” To this obvious lie, Marvolo raised an eyebrow, causing the wizard to bow lower and trail off.

“Was any of the young men one of my Death Eaters, and therefore one of those with the permission to use my mark to claim a crime?” Marvolo was sure he should have thought about the possibility that the incantation had leaked out to people not of his circle. Sadly, there was no way to get the spell under wraps again, now that it was out of the bag, so to speak.

“No, my Lord.” It seemed that the message Marvolo wanted to send was sinking in. Corban had started to shake and was getting paler.

“Then why do you claim that they were doing my work?” With a little dramatic twirl, Marvolo got the phial out of his pocket. The poison should work even better when ingested with alcohol instead of tea, as Marvolo had had planned originally.

To this question Marvolo didn’t get an answer. Another wave of the yew wand in his hand hat the tumbler standing back on the small table and a decanter of some amber alcohol floating over from a cabinet. It really was pointless to speak with the man, who would be dead in a few moments anyway.

“I feel that your younger brother will be a better Head of the family when you are removed from the picture.” Marvolo placed the small phial next to the decanter and the tumbler, both cut from crystal, clearly some of the more expensive pieces in this room mostly decorated with dark wood. “And I won’t hesitate to use force.” Maybe casting the Imperius would be best. That way, there wouldn’t be any signs of a struggle, as the traces of the spell quickly vanished once a person was dead.

But it seemed that Corban Yaxley knew that there was no way to escape, and if he wanted to go with some dignity still intact, he needed to do as he was told. After all, he had sworn himself to Marvolo as his Lord, it was his duty to do as he was told. And to follow the rules his Lord laid down. And it was up to Marvolo to punish his vassal for breaking his law. It was curious how those old spells and magics worked. No wonder the Ministry had felt it safer to just ban them all. The Ministry tended to go the easy way, rather than the best one.

With a satisfied smile Marvolo watched as Corban sat down in his armchair, placed his wand onto the end table, took the phial from the surface and removed the cork, just before he emptied the contents into the small tumbler. The phial was placed down – now empty – and the drink that filled the room with the smoky aroma of good fire whiskey was added to the deadly mixture.

“No one uses my insignia defying me. No one acts against my explicit wishes without suffering for it. You were acting against me, Corban Yaxley. You intended to recruit those young men and use them to undermine my goals, because they do no longer fit perfectly with what you believe in. But I have evidence that your ridiculous beliefs are false. You did defy your Lord, now you will die by your own hand in recompense.”

It didn’t take long after the tumbler was empty for Corban Yaxley to fall out of the armchair, shaking with convulsions, foam coming from his mouth. When the rattling breaths finally had ended, Marvolo took a last look at everything before he re-applied the charm to hide his presence, before he then swiftly left the room and house to apparate back home.

Now he had to wait.
Tuesday, 19th of December

It was the last day before they all would be taking the train back to London. The common room was alive with people searching for stuff that somehow had managed to migrate from their trunks to who-knew-where, even this early in the morning. Harry sat, still rather sleepy, in his chair in front of the biggest fire, waiting for Theo to finish with whatever was taking him so long. He was sketching, as he was doing quite often since his therapy had introduced him to art. It was different now that Aunt Petunia wouldn’t tear up what he made, while praising whatever smear of paint Dudley brought back. Now he had people that actually appreciated what he did. His biggest creation, the painting of Hogwarts by night, was currently drying in his room, and now he tried to get a small sketch finished for all those who were close to him. It was better than sweets – which he would sent to most of the people he regularly interacted with – but not as significant as some of the other acceptable things one could gift to a peer. The rules were rather strange sometimes, but he needed to follow them if he wanted to be Lord Potter one day, and respected. One couldn’t really play the game by flouting the rules.

At the moment he was trying to capture the likeness of Millicent Bulstrode’s cat, which was curled up on top of a school bag. He planned to give each of his Slytherin year-mates and all of the Gryffindors of his year a small sketch. Or all of them who weren’t really his friends. It was a lot of work. But it was fun, too.

He only wished that he knew a way to animate his sketches.

Suddenly Professor Snape strode into the common room, and the conversations and general din suddenly stopped, making way for an all-encompassing silence. Within moments all eyes were trained on their Head of House, who was looking around, obviously searching for someone or something. Harry noticed that the man held a letter in his hand and wondered who had sent it and who was about to receive important news.

A moment later the conversations started again, now with the topic changed. When Harry spotted Yaxley, the seventh-year who was the oldest son of the younger brother of the Head of the Yaxley family, staggering more than walking next to Snape, the letter clutched in his hand, Harry knew that something had happened there.

It was only reasonable to assume that the scandal of the other’s cousin abducting and drugging three young witches to keep as sex-slaves wasn’t going to remain without consequences. Maybe Corban Yaxley had been taken into custody as well, making his younger brother the next Head of the Family… no, only if there was issued a lifetime sentence, or the Kiss administered, would the position change to the younger brother.

Harry shook his head, and went back to sketching the cat. It had ignored all the commotion like nothing mattered as long as it had a comfortable spot to sleep.

By lunch the fact that Corban Yaxley had killed himself in his home, leaving his younger brother in the position of Head of the Family, had made the rounds. The reactions were varied. Harry himself wasn’t sure if he believed the story of suicide. But most of the other students seemed to be
of the opinion that it was a likely reaction for a Slytherin. Harry wasn’t so sure. Many Slytherin alumni had managed to talk themselves out of tighter spots, why should the man take poison over something his son had done? But Harry kept his thoughts to himself, only remarking that the Aurors would get to the bottom of the matter when asked for his opinion persistently.

Kingsley was one of the Aurors who had been sent to investigate the apparent suicide of Corban Yaxley. In fact the place was crawling with people. And as usual, he and Dawlish were here to help as a team. “Let’s ask the two elves living here if there was anything unusual yesterday evening. That’s the time the healer said the man died, right?”

Dawlish nodded, carefully moving around the people milling about.

They made it to the kitchen all right, where the two elves watched, wringing their hands, as a team of Aurors inspected each and every piece of food, as well as the opened bottles. The interrogation of the elves was quick and brought nothing new. The elves had been dismissed and had gone to bed, until they had gotten up in the morning to prepare breakfast and found their master dead in the gentlemen's smoking room.

“Do you think the new spell for evidence on who touched something will help?” Dawlish asked, sounding rather sceptical.

“No. I’ve seen the phial. It’s of a make I've seen often in Knockturn Alley. No idea who the brewer is, but those phials go through many, many hands before they're used,” Kingsley explained. It had been a mystery for many decades now who was providing those potions. From simple sleeping potions to the worst poisons, to the elaborate recreational potions sometimes taken by the young and stupid.

It didn’t really feel right. Didn’t feel like a suicide. But they probably would have trouble to proving that.

The light of a grey winter day fell through the windows into the corridors of St. Mungo's. Minerva had brought a package of Sherbet Lemons for this visit. She was really happy that Poppy had insisted on their yearly examinations, and that she had consulted an expert. It looked as if Dumbledore had been exposed to a dangerous amount of Dark Magic. But they had noticed it early enough to be able to counter it before it really became dangerous. Now, just before the Christmas Holiday, she was here to visit with her old friend, to tell him what was happening at the school. He always preferred to be kept in the loop.

A friendly Medi-witch had described the way, and now Minerva was standing in front of the private room Albus was in. She knocked and waited a moment before she was called in. “Hello, Albus! I brought some of your favourite sweets.” She smiled at the old wizard sitting sideways on his bed, looking rather unhappy. “Don’t sulk, Albus. You will be back at the castle in the new year. A few more purification treatments, and the traces will be gone.” It was quite clear that Albus
wasn’t happy being here.

“I simply think that this isn’t necessary, Minerva.” Albus finally smiled at her, looking rather despondent in his hospital-issued robes. “Poppy could have given me the potions, could have performed what is necessary. No reason to force me to stay here. Really, Minerva! This is not necessary.”

“You know as well as I that Poppy doesn’t have the ritual circle needed to combat the traces of Dark Magic, Albus. Why are you so against this? You above anyone else know what can happen if someone is exposed to Dark Magic for too long.” She patted his arm, placed the sweets on the bedside table before sitting down in the visitor’s chair.

“I know that you don’t like to be inactive. So I brought you this,” she got a magazine out of her expanded inner pocket. It had taken her some time to find it, as she hadn’t made it a habit to venture into the muggle world aside from the yearly muggle-born visits. “A knitting magazine. I remembered that you repeatedly talked about how you like to read them and look at the pattern schematics.” Minerva was sure Albus was going stir-crazy, being confined wasn’t something the old Headmaster could bear. But it simply was needed. She was sure he would complain and mope some more, and when he came back after the treatment was finished, she would have her old mentor back.

“It simply is a dull place to stay, Minerva.” He smiled and took one of the candies, before he opened the magazine. “Oh, that’s a new one. I haven’t seen this edition before.” It seemed as if he was trying to put up a brave front, but she wasn’t really fooled.

“I will visit often over the holidays. There aren’t many students staying at the school this year, the others can easily manage without me for a few hours at a time.” Before Minerva could start on the school gossip she had planned to tell to Albus, the door opened again.

“Good evening, Mr. Dumbledore. I’m here to bring you your dinner. And don’t levitate the cup again. Do you hear me? You shouldn’t use magic during the treatment period. There’s a reason why you had to hand over your wand to the hospital staff.” In that moment the medi-witch turned and noticed that Minerva was sitting in the visitor’s chair. Her face instantly morphed into an artificially friendly mask. And while she placed the tray she had brought onto a small table to the side, she started to speak. “You will have to go now, Madame. Visiting hours are over.”

Minerva frowned. “The people down at the entrance said there were still a few hours’ time for visits.” And they had. She had asked yesterday to make sure she would have enough time for a proper visit.

She was quite rudely interrupted by the unfriendly medi-witch. “The patients on this station need more rest, so the visiting time is shorter here than on the others. So you’ll have to leave now!”

Quite miffed, and tempted to find the locker of this awful woman to pay it a visit in her cat form, Minerva said her farewells to Albus, wishing him a good rest, before she was ushered out of the room and then the ward. With an offended huff Minerva left the building to apparate back to the castle. She would come back the next day, once the train had left, so she would have more time to visit with Albus.

ooOoo
Albus really wasn’t happy that his plan hadn’t worked the way he had wanted it to. What they had given him to affect him and paint him as unsuitable for his calling of Headmaster of Hogwarts must have been stronger than he had anticipated. They still had committed him to the hospital, claiming he had dangerous levels of Dark Magic taint running around in his bloodstream, that should be removed as quickly as possible.

In that moment he hadn’t been able to come up with a way to get out of this confinement. And now he was here, in the hospital, without his wand, without proper clothes, forced to participate in daily rituals they claimed were to help him.

Just like he now sat down at the table, picking up the spoon to pretend to eat the soup, Albus had managed to convince the personnel here that he was cooperating, while the whole time he was looking out for a way to get away, reclaim his wand, and rescue them all from the dark wizards out for their health.

Minerva had brought him his favourite sweets. But did she really not know anything? Or was she in on the plan, delivering the poison to him in the form of his Lemon drops?

It was hard to work when you couldn’t know who to trust anymore. Maybe he would manage to slip away when the young medi-wizard in training came in three days to bring him to those rituals. He was properly awed by Albus, and most likely didn’t know any better. It should be possible to convince him that Albus was held prisoner here.

“Now, Mr. Dumbledore. It’s time for you to go to bed.” The medi-witch was back, not really paying attention to the fact that Albus had managed to vanish the soup wandlessly, and not eat a drop of it. He wouldn’t make it easy on them all. But all that wandless magic had made him really sleepy. So Albus let himself be manhandled over to the bed, placed there and tucked in by the witch aimlessly rambling off unimportant gossip. Her wand was poking out of her apron pocket, if Albus just wasn’t so tired, he could have snatched that wand, and made a break for it. Maybe he should claim not to be hungry tomorrow, so he wouldn’t be quite so tired the next time there was an opportunity. But before he really could make any more plans, he slipped into sleep, the staff around him none the wiser that he planned to make an escape as soon as he found a way.

Chapter End Notes

To all of you A Happy New Year! I hope you had a better start than me, and that this year will be better for all of us than the last.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Wednesday, 20th of December

Never before had Harry taken the train back to London for the Christmas Holidays. It was not really all that different from the return in the summer. Or maybe it was. There was the normal excitement, people searching for something at the last minute, hastily eating breakfast. But on the other hand, not everyone was going, so there were a few islands of calm in the sea of hastily moving students. And quite a few did leave their trunks at school, only taking a few things with them.

“Where do you want to sit, Harry?” Theo wanted to know, climbing into one of the thestral-drawn carriages down to the station in Hogsmeade.

“On the train? No idea. Ron and Hermione have to patrol, as does Draco.” Harry followed his friend and sat down heavily on the upholstered bench, puffs of warm air making clouds before his face. It was a very cold day, and it didn’t look as if it would really get any brighter than the dreary grey the sky currently held. “Find a big compartment, where the others can come and go, stay for a while if they want to? I want to draw, so I have no preference.”

Theo laughed, burrowing deeper into the thick scarf wound around his neck. “That’s as good a plan as any other.” They were quickly joined by Astoria and Daphne, after which the carriage started on its way down the road to the gates and the station beyond.

The two teenagers managed to find a compartment rather quickly. They had their school bags packed with the things they would need – or maybe would want, rather – to use during the long train ride. The rest of their stuff was in their trunks, which the elves had moved earlier in the morning. Harry had packed everything of his. Theo and the others had left quite a few things behind. Harry knew that it would mean packing everything again once the holidays were over, but he just couldn’t bring himself to leave anything behind at school.

It didn’t take long for the others to turn up. Hermione walked in together with Ron, Neville, and Ginny. Ginny decided to search for some of her own year-mates, dragging Neville along, who smiled and shrugged silently in apology. One look around and Ron left again with a mumbled. “I think I’ll sit with Dean and Seamus.” Leaving only Hermione to place her bag in one of the racks, where she also deposited her winter wear.

A few moments later Draco came in, followed by Crabbe and Goyle. “I think I'll patrol right after the train starts moving for a time. And then again later. Has anyone seen Pansy?”

“No,” Hermione answered. “But I fear Ron will try everything to get out of patrolling. So if you
aren’t against it, I’d like to accompany you until you either find Miss Parkinson, or I can track Ronald down.”

Harry watched with an amused twinkle in his eyes as Draco accepted with a polite – if slightly stiff – nod. It was amusing time and time again to see Draco wrestling with the old prejudices he had been raised with. Now that Hermione, the muggle-born witch, was heiress to the old family of Lestrange, all of Draco’s old world views were being challenged. Mostly the blond teenager managed to cope rather well, but then there were situations like this one that still came as a surprise.

Once the Gryffindor and Slytherin prefects had left the compartment together, Harry got out his sketchbook and started to work on the sketches he still had to finish. While Draco wasn’t anywhere nearby, Harry planned to sketch a peacock for his present. It just was too fitting not to do it. After all, it was the animal on the Malfoy family crest. That the strutting around those birds were known for fit so well with the way Draco sometimes walked around was just a happy coincidence.

With a small smile Harry started to move the charcoal piece over the thick paper of his sketchbook.

ooOoo

Draco felt awkward walking next to Hermione Granger, the Gryffindor know-it-all, whom he had taunted so often over her heritage in the past. And now that it was clear she really had magical ancestors, he felt insecure around her.

They made their way down the train, students from younger years darting out of their way the moment they saw the prefect badges on their lapels. Draco liked the position of power and respect he had gotten with being made prefect. But he didn’t really like the late evening patrols, or the fact that first-years were expected to come to him to ask for help and sympathy if they needed it. The fact that the other Slytherin prefects knew perfectly well how to keep others from taking advantage of them even prevented Draco from foisting the less appealing duties onto someone else. So it really was a mixed bag. The fact that his parents had been so very proud of him had slightly tipped the scales in favour of being a prefect. Sadly, the day-to-day wasn’t all that glorious.

They walked in silence, keeping an eye out for trouble, and searching for their counterparts. Draco was sure Weasley would go to some trouble to evade patrolling and keeping order, and Pansy probably was somewhere with her friends. As soon as he found her, it would be easy to arrange something resembling a schedule.

“Why don’t you pick that up?” Draco started as he heard the mocking tone asking a clearly rhetorical question, taunting. The laughter to be heard just moments after were confirmation that there was a group of children mocking one or more others.

Neither Draco nor Hermione were strangers to such situations. But, Draco had to admit, they probably had been on different sides when they had experienced bullying. Draco had been – and was – mostly the one doing the taunting. Granger probably had been the target most of the time.

“What is going on here?” The Gryffindor prefect asked the moment they stepped into the place at the end of a wagon where there was a little more space than in the walkways, shielded from being seen into from the compartments.
There were several first-years – they were so small – standing in somewhat of an unorganized group. A girl had tears running down her face. Several books were on the floor at her feet. One of the boys looked defiant, another nervous. They hadn’t mastered the innocent look yet. As they all were in their normal clothes, not school robes, it wasn’t obvious to what house they belonged. But a cursory glance at least let Draco know that there was not one Slytherin among the children fidgeting before them.

“Nothing,” the bravest of the lot claimed, contradicting himself by shifting nervously from one foot to the other.

“Right,” Draco drawled, giving them all an unimpressed look. “Apologize. Pick her books up. And then get back to your compartments. Then we can forget this. Or be stubborn and we will report you.” Most professors only acted against bullying when it reached the level of the attacks on Harry at the end. Everything that wasn’t life-threatening usually only resulted in a few points lost, a detention at most. Maybe the fact that prefects tended to handle such situations without informing a professor contributed to the situation.

And it seemed that these first-years had already learned as much. “As if! By the time we're back after the holidays, you'll already have forgotten everything about this. Probably even the moment you're back with your own friends.”

Draco smirked and shrugged one shoulder. “I might. But she,” Draco waved a hand in Granger’s direction – who was glowering impressively – without really taking his eyes from the outspoken one and therefore probably the leader of this group, “has no trouble remembering the most obscure facts even after years. I’m sure she’ll make sure that this incident gets reported if you refuse to behave.”

It was a testament to Granger’s reputation as a know-it-all that the moment Draco brought up her powers of recalling facts, the books were picked up, apologies were hastily uttered, and youngsters scurried away.

Once they were alone the Gryffindor gave Draco an unimpressed look. One of the sort his mother was prone to give him whenever he tried to get out of some stupid duty. “What?” he asked with feigned confusion.

“We should report them anyway. But now we don’t know their names.” Granger clearly wasn’t impressed with Draco’s way of handling the situation.

“There was no Slytherin among them. Do you want to tell me that not one of them was a Gryffindor? That would reduce the number of possible suspects dramatically.” Draco frowned. He knew from tales that Ravenclaws were prone to bullying those that didn’t make an effort to fit in, but he couldn’t really imagine Hufflepuffs bullying anyone. They were just generally too nice.

Bushy hair brushed her shoulders as she shook her head. “The one who talked to you is a Gryffindor. But not all of them were, and certainly not the girl they were bullying. We should report this.”

Draco rolled his eyes. For all that Granger had changed, she still was fixated on the rules. Maybe her inclination to stick to the rules and not to question everything presented to her as a fact was the reason she had been placed into Gryffindor and not Ravenclaw. It always had been a recurring topic of discussion among the Slytherins of their year how Granger was not a Raven.

“Report him if you want. But you know as well as I that the professors don’t really act against such things.”
Granger didn’t react to that, which Draco took as confirmation of what he had said. She probably
would report the boy anyway, but that wasn’t his concern. When they walked past a compartment
occupied by Pansy and her friends – probably discussing their dresses for the balls they would
attend – Granger and Draco split up, she planning to search for the current Weasley prefect and he
to speak with his female counterpart in Slytherin.

ooOoo

Ron had managed to dodge Hermione and her insistence that he should take on patrolling the
corridors in an effort to keep the other students in line. Why would they even need to? They all
were on their way back home, eager for the holidays. In Ron’s opinion, there was no real trouble to
be feared. But Hermione had only huffed, crossed her arms, rolled her eyes at him, and had
stormed off to do as she had planned all along.

Now the red-headed young wizard was on his way to speak to his best friend. If he still could call
Harry that. Because Harry had changed so much since the summer. Since that awful day his dad
had taken Harry to the Ministry where he had been adopted against his will. Ron had felt that he
and Harry had been drifting apart. And if he didn’t do something to keep them together, now that
Harry was a Slytherin in school and out of it too, their friendship would certainly die.

At first Ron hadn’t known what to do. But then he had written to Bill for advice, and his older
brother had delivered. If one wanted to keep a friendship, one needed to work for it. When you
lived together with your friends, ate together, went to classes together, played together, it was easy
to keep a friendship alive. But if you had to arrange for time to do something together, it was
harder.

Ron was now in the more difficult position, with Harry now living in the dungeons, and going to
classes with the Slytherins. But he was stubborn. He would not give in so easily. Even with the
way Harry had changed, Ron would find a way to make things work.

He reached the compartment Harry had sat down in earlier and looked through the door. The
curtains weren’t drawn, so Ron could see Harry sitting in the seat by the window, a book on his lap
while he was taking notes on a piece of parchment. This new studiousness was one of the new
things that Ron had trouble accepting.

His blue eyes wandered over the others in the compartment. Nott, Crabbe and Goyle, another
Slytherin who was part of their Quidditch Team, were sitting there with Harry. Those new people
Harry was spending time with were another thing hard to accept. But as Bill had said, Harry was a
friendly guy. If someone was decent to him, he wasn’t one to just ignore them, never had been.

Taking a deep breath, Ron steeled himself before he pushed the door open, walking in to sit down
on the one seat not occupied by someone or something. All conversations stopped, and Harry
looked up from the book he was reading. It was Intermediate Transfiguration, their textbook for
Professor McGonagall’s class this year.

“Ron!” Harry said with a smile, starting to pack his things away. “Hadn’t thought you would
surface again. Hermione was quite cross that she couldn’t find you.”

“Yes, well, I don’t know why she’s so keen to walk up and down the train. She could read
something instead.”
Harry laughed to that. After all, it was true that Hermione tended to read a lot. Like in almost every free moment she had.

And then they sat there for a few moments in awkward silence until Ron finally managed to break the uncomfortable silence. “I wanted to invite you to the Burrow for a few days during the holidays.” It would have been so much better if the Slytherins hadn’t been here. Not that Ron feared to be rejected, but it was uncomfortable with those others here.

“That’s great!” Harry said with a big grin. “It’s always great at your home! But I will have to ask for permission. I’m not sure where I have to be during the holidays. You know, all the events and balls… would be great to just be with my friends for a change.”

Ron was baffled. Harry needed to ask for permission? He never had asked in the past. “Why do you need to ask if you can come? You never stopped to ask for permission in the past. Am I no longer important enough?” Ron felt hurt, deeply hurt. And even more so when he saw the uncomprehending expression on Harry’s face.

“Ron, seriously, do your parents know that you want me to visit?” It had taken a moment, but now Harry seemed to know what he wanted to say, his green eyes locked firmly on Ron’s face.

Ron shrugged, now puzzled himself. “Of course, I told them. Mum always wants to know if more people will be at the Burrow. So she can cook enough for everyone.” Why would Harry ask something like that?

“So your parents gave permission for my visit?” Now Harry gave him a pointed look, and he had stressed the word permission in an odd way. Ron felt himself blush brightly the moment he caught on to what Harry had been trying to say. “Please don’t be that way, now that I finally have someone caring enough about me that he wants to know where I am or where I plan to go.”

After that the conversation was strained, and Ron quickly found a reason to leave again. Maybe Dean would play a game of chess with him as he had claimed they had planned all along. Ron wasn’t convinced that the others had bought his excuse, but no one had said anything, so he planned to pretend that everything was just the way he had claimed it to be.

Why was life so much more complicated now? All had seemed so simple when they had started Hogwarts.

oooOOooo

From where Marvolo stood next to one of the many decorated windows with a view out into the snow-covered garden, he could hear the other attendees of this tea party talking animatedly to each other. He had moved to this spot here, a little away from the others, to have a moment of quiet. All these parties were getting to be a bit much. Especially in the way that they were piled on each other during this time before the turn of the year.

It was soothing to watch the snow fall, knowing that the children were already on the train on their way back to London. They would arrive in the early evening, and Marvolo planned to be at the train station to pick his son up. Something no one had ever done for him when he was a child. Not that he would have wanted to be picked up. At least he never would have admitted to being jealous of all the children whose parents came to meet them at the station when he had been a child and
later a teen. He wasn’t even that sure what he felt now. There was only a vague sense of curiosity what it would have been like to have someone to care about him.

Marvolo knew that he had only a few moments of time for a break. His absence would be noticed soon, and as Lord Slytherin, guardian of the Boy-Who-Lived, and the reborn and redeemed individual responsible – somehow – for the fact that Henry was an orphan. The others would follow him the moment they realized that he wasn’t just in the restroom for a moment.

This tea party was one of the more boring gatherings Marvolo had had to attend. The fact that there were several match-making mothers of older, still-single witches after him only added to the horror of this afternoon.

“Hey, beautiful. The old stuffy people are a bit much, aren’t they? Can I keep you company?” The voice from behind him was trying to be seductive, and certainly wasn’t entirely unsuccessful. It only took a moment for Marvolo’s lips to curl in amusement as he realized that Sirius Black was standing behind him, flirting with him.

Marvolo turned to the wizard slowly coming closer, his robes moving around his legs with the elegance of the expensive fabric they were made of. “You certainly can keep me company, Lord Black. But I doubt you’ll want to.”

The look of incredulous shock on the other wizard’s face was enough for Marvolo to chuckle. It was obvious that Black hadn’t expected him here. “Who did you think I was?”

After a moment of bewildered spluttering, Black managed to regain his balance, as Marvolo allowed him to reclaim his composure. It would have been easy to keep him off balance if Marvolo had wanted to.

“I thought you were that young bloke from the magical sports department. The one that came over from the continent and started only last summer? I’m… I really don’t know what to say.” Black obviously felt uncomfortable, and still not back on firm ground.

Marvolo had seen the young man Black was talking about. He had a fit body, and was wearing green robes today. Not of as good a cut as Marvolo’s, or of such fine quality, but to be mistaken for him was quite the compliment. “Thank you, I guess.” Marvolo smirked. “There are fates worse than being thought to be a young quidditch player. Spending any more time fending off match-making mothers is one of them.” He picked up his glass of red wine from where he had placed it on the windowsill. “But be assured I’m certainly not interested in any more than talking with my adopted son’s godfather.”

That earned him an unsure laugh. “Match-making mothers are a nightmare.” There was more humour in the young dark-haired wizard's voice than Marvolo himself felt when pondering that particular problem.

“What are you doing to evade their clutches? When they are after me – the barely redeemed former Dark Lord – they have to be really pestering you.” With a slight wave of his hand, Marvolo indicated the whole of Sirius Black. A young wizard of considerable wealth, a good – if slightly tarnished – family name, good looks, and a roguish charm that many women seemed to like.

Said wizard carded his hand through his hair, flushing slightly. “I can’t deny that they are persistent. But I guess the fact that it’s obvious I don’t plan to marry and settle down anytime soon, keeps them a little at bay.”

Marvolo took a sip from his wine, mulling those words over. “And the fact I have a son, am older –
if you look at it a certain way – and thought more mature is the reason they’re more persistent with me?” He frowned. That would be bad, because he really wasn’t sure what he wanted to get out of such a relationship.

“Maybe?” was the reply Black gave, shrugging a little helplessly. “Or maybe I just ignore them better. I really don’t want to marry, even if the whole responsibility to continue the family line now lies with me. But I wouldn’t have cared before. Why should I care now? But do I want the money and everything to go to Lucius’ brat? I asked Harry to be my heir. He said it would be too much. Now… I’m not really sure what to do. Do you know anything about ancestry-tracing enchantments, Lord Slytherin?”

Marvolo blinked in surprise. That was a rather abrupt shift in topic. Or maybe not. From talking about heirs to ancestry-tracing enchantments wasn’t too big a leap. “That’s not a branch of magic that I studied extensively. And the secrets of those enchantments are rather closely guarded by those creating them. Why do you ask?” All Marvolo knew about those enchantments was that they were bound to a family by blood, and recorded the ancestry as it happened, so to speak. Where the ancestry test provided by the goblin nation laid open the ancestry of a person just based on their blood, the ancestry-recording – or tracing – enchantments took notes when someone of the traced family was born or died.

“There’s a tapestry. It was damaged when my mother burned the spots where people were named whom she didn’t approve of. It damaged the enchantments. I had hoped to see if there is someone, somewhere, who can be my heir. Other than Harry, Narcissa’s son, or Dora. But everyone I ask just says to create a new one. And I’m not sure that’ll work.” Black turned to look around and then sat down in an armchair standing a little to the side.

“I’m sorry. I never was that interested in those types of enchantments. So do you plan to marry and have a child, at all?” Marvolo was curious. He knew that it was society's expectation that young wizards and witches should marry and have children. At least one, better more. And that expectation was even heavier for those that were either Head of a family, or heir to that family. He had demanded that his followers have more children. It was a little hard to argue that he should be exempt from that rule.

But as he was in no way interested in sexual contact with anyone a marriage seemed superfluous. And like a recipe for disaster, as Marvolo was sure that any eventual partner would want sexual interactions, and if not with him, with someone else, adding to the potential disaster. Jealousy was a strong emotion, one that he had used in the past to manipulate people to act as he wanted them to.

Black slumped even deeper into his seat. “No. I don’t think I ever will. But then… life can be unpredictable. Maybe I’ll meet the one tomorrow and never look back?”

Before Marvolo could formulate an answer to that ridiculously romantic notion of true love, they were found by the hostess and dragged back to the larger party. Their eyes met over the room, resignation and a little bit of desperation evident to both of them. Then Marvolo turned his attention to the people in his little group, keeping up with the boring conversation, while idly wondering how it had happened that he felt that he was in the same boat with Sirius Black.

Xerxes watched as the red train rolled into the station. He was standing among all the other
families here to pick up their children for the holidays. Next to him were Hermione’s parents, and his Lord. Xerxes had picked up the two dentists from their home, and they all had been talking about the school and the attempts to get magical children without a proper family adopted. The school was doing great, but the children they had taken from the streets, from abusive or neglecting homes, and foster care, were hard to get into wizarding families. Many weren’t equipped to care for children with trauma to overcome, or they wanted to know the ancestry of the child in question before committing to taking them in.

Even understanding why they were so interested in the ancestry of the children, Xerxes preferred to give children to those families who were willing to take in a child regardless of their ancestors. The fact that many of the children – especially the older ones – needed so much specialised care had forced Xerxes to employ mind-healers and psychologists specialised in trauma patients. Helping them was a slow process.

The train stopped and the doors opened almost like an explosion. Children and young adults poured out of the train, owls and cats suddenly making a racket, families shouting in greeting and in an attempt to find each other more quickly.

Their group stood their ground, keeping watch in every direction to make sure they would spot the children they had come here to pick up as soon as possible.

It didn’t take long for a group of teenagers to come out of the train, spot their group – many of the Slytherin parents were clumped together right in the middle of the platform – and make their way over, managing to handle their trunks and familiars with some difficulty.

Xerxes until now had forgotten what a mess the platform always was when the train was leaving or arriving. But it had been some time since the last time he had picked up his sons from the train. And dropping off Hermione and her parents at the start of term hadn’t offered an opportunity to visit the platform or take in the pandemonium. He had had too much to do with his own school back then.

A trunk made a resounding sound when it hit the platform, and a bushy-haired girl in a warm muggle coat flew by to crash into her parents. “Mum! Dad! I’ve missed you both!”

Xerxes smiled, his focus on his nephew and his family while registering the others greeting their children around them. Benjamin clasped his son’s shoulder, Lucius looked on as his wife – in robes accentuating the fact she was pregnant – greeted their son with a warm embrace, and his Lord awkwardly stood next to his adopted son. They both looked unsure what to do.

But now was the time to greet his heiress, and tell her about his plans for the holidays. There were a lot of events that he had planned.

“Hermione, I’m happy to see you so high-spirited.” Xerxes smiled at the young girl, who was held in a loose embrace between her mother and father. “I gather the travel was comfortable and not too boring?”

The girl laughed. “A train filled with students on their way home for the holidays? I guess there would be no way to make that boring.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief. Xerxes would have loved to know the story behind that look.

“I still have trouble understanding why the kids have to travel by train when magical transportation would make it possible to reach the school in a few seconds,” Jean stated, her cheeks red from the cold, her curls peeking out from under her warm woollen hat.
“It’s a good opportunity to talk with friends, to work on last-minute homework, make new friends… it’s kind of a transition from home to school, or back, depending on the direction of travel.” Hermione shrugged, her tone one Xerxes knew from those accustomed to lecturing.

With a laugh Xerxes gained the others’ attention again. “I wanted to inform you all that my two older sons will be visiting Britain shortly after the new year. They asked for an opportunity to meet with the family in its entirety and proposed a meeting in a restaurant. They wrote it would be neutral territory. I just received the letter this morning, and I wanted to ask all of your opinion before sending a reply.” Of course the letter was only a ruse to make the new identities of his sons’ more believable. They had worked on it together the previous evening, coming up with polite wording and a good reason for the newly created twins to visit London.

Xerxes had to say that the new looks were excellent. The ritual their Lord had adapted for the ageing to the same age and altering of their genetic make-up had worked perfectly. His sons now were of the same age, a few years older than they had originally been, and looked as if their mother had been of mixed South American and Hispanic ancestry. They had decided on a background as gatherers and hunters of exotic magical beasts and plants of the South American continent. It was a good explanation for the lack of permanent residence or stable income.

They had been working a lot on their language skills, and a few exotic – at least from a British perspective – spells to give credence to their story.

“I think we should be able to find the time. Which restaurant do you want to go to? Are there wizarding restaurants?” Fabian said, clutching his daughter to his chest with his right arm and the hand of his wife in his left hand.

“There are.” Xerxes nodded, that had been easier than he had feared. “I will make a reservation and write a letter to make the arrangements.”

Talking merrily among each other, they waved to those still on the platform, walking down to the barrier so they could leave through that exit. Xerxes had a portkey to his home, where they would eat dinner, plan the next weeks, and just talk before he would transport the Grangers back to their own home.

ooOoo

Harry had watched the others go to their families, greeting them with easy familiarity – Mrs. Weasley smothering her four youngest with hugs, Theo nodding to his father, Draco embarrassed over his mother’s embrace – while he walked towards Marvolo who was standing among all those others, waiting for him.

There were quite a few adults casting doubtful or curious glances at Marvolo, or those that restrained themselves from bowing to him. If it hadn’t been a reminder that Marvolo had a past by the name of Voldemort, it would have been hilarious.

Harry reminded himself that this was Marvolo the new person starting over, the man who had cared for Harry, the man he had talked to every day for a few months now, because he was interested in how Harry’s classes went, what he did from day to day, and how he felt. Just those simple facts made him that much better a guardian than the Dursleys had ever been.
Harry gave a short bow, not really sure how he should greet his guardian. The enthusiastic hug Hermione had used on her parents felt as inadequate as a simple bow or handshake. Maybe he should have asked Madame Goyle for advice beforehand. But too late now.

“Thank you for picking me up… Father.” Using that to address Marvolo didn’t feel quite right yet. Using father to name him in front of his fellow Slytherins had been surprisingly easy after the first few times. But using it here to Marvolo’s face was really not quite right yet.

Marvolo nodded, his presently blue eyes unreadable, with a small smile. “Why shouldn’t I be here to pick you up… son? The tailor will arrive shortly at our home. I thought it best to get you some new clothes – you have grown – and we both need robes for the events and balls.” Marvolo rolled his eyes, forcing Harry to hold back a snort. It wasn’t the first time that Marvolo had expressed a clear wish for the social season to be over already. By all accounts – Sirius had added his share of stories – going to all these parties, events, and gatherings was tiring.

So Harry sighed, accepting his fate. “We will apparate home. And you might be happy to know that there was a lot of snow over the last few days. Everything is covered in white. And Flimm was busy decorating the rooms for the festivities. He was adamant about making all your favourites for dinner today.”

That brightened Harry’s spirits. With the promise of shepherd's pie and treacle tart, the ordeal of getting measured for new clothes again would be easier to bear.

With a last wave to his friends – those that still were there – Harry took charge of Hedwig’s cage, while Marvolo called for Flimm to get the trunk back to Griffin House. After a short and uncomfortable trip via apparition, Harry was home again.

And for the first time, going away from Hogwarts to stay with family over the holidays felt like coming home.

oooOOooo

The staff room was as sterile as the rest of the building was in most places. White and the lime green of the healer’s profession dominated the décor. People in the lime green robes of the Healers sat scattered around the table, which was covered with parchments and clipboards, as well as cups of over-steeped tea and bitter coffee.

Jeremy Jugson had listened attentively as one after another of his colleagues had reported on their patients, asked for second opinions, and discussed treatment plans for those cases that were more complicated than a simple spell gone wrong.

In front of him – right next to the too-sweet but still bitter tea – was the file on his main patient. Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. All his thoughts had been revolving around that man for the last few days. It felt like weeks. And what they had found so far really was troubling. Jeremy hoped the others would have an idea on how to proceed from here.

“Healer Jugson, please inform us how your patients are doing.” The healer in charge of their floor – Alice Delwick – passed on the right to speak and moderate the discussion to him.

“Of course, Healer Delwick. I’m concerned. Mr. Dumbledore isn’t very cooperative. The mediwitch responsible for him reported that he is using magic without his wand, and tries to sneak his
potions so he can discard them.” With a flick of his hand the file in front of Jeremy opened. “The tests on his blood are back. They show traces of mood-lightening potions, and those that are commonly used to mask the effects of several ailments that affect the mind.” Jeremy cast a look around the room to impress the seriousness of the situation on his colleagues. “I think he was actively trying to conceal the effects of the harmful magic on him. The case is much more serious than we first thought. The fact that he is still using magic, not actively participating in his treatment… I think he might be more paranoid than I had first assumed. Taking those new findings into account, I want to place him into a closed room under constant supervision. Maybe it isn’t too late to counter the effects if we intensify the treatment now. But it could get bad rather fast if Mr. Dumbledore was to attempt an escape.”

For a moment everyone was silent. Disbelief was the prominent emotion on most faces. And Jeremy couldn’t blame them for that. Albus Dumbledore had always been put on a pedestal, even by those that didn’t agree with his policies. He always had been the infallible hero or idiot, depending on who you asked.

“He is an intelligent wizard. How can you even think for a moment that he would sabotage his own health in such a way?” And there it was, the first veiled accusation, an expression of disbelief. And there probably would only be more opposition to work against.

“I agree that he is intelligent. And that is the reason why I believe that he has taken steps to conceal his state.” Jeremy nodded in response, steering the conversation back on track. If they got into that kind of discussion – about politics and character traits rather than healing – they wouldn’t accomplish anything today. “The treatments already administered should have caused a bigger improvement than we can observe in Mr. Dumbledore. Intelligent men notice that something isn’t right if effects of harmful magic start to show. Paired with the usual paranoia starting at the same time, the mind comes up with all kinds of explanations, mostly not connected to the truth at all. Mr. Dumbledore has had enough opponents in his life that he might have thought they were trying to get rid of him.” A pointed look interrupted one of the others who had opened his mouth to say something. “Mr. Dumbledore is intelligent and talented enough to brew the potions to mask the bad effects. After all, he has studied alchemy, which isn’t such an obscure art for no reason. I’m sure even a mood-lightening potion isn’t above his capabilities.”

The room descended into chaos after that. Most of the healers didn’t want to believe that Dumbledore might actually be so bad in his mind that he would act against them and sabotage his own treatment. A few argued that Jeremy was the expert in this field, bringing on some of the more frequent accusations of being a dark wizard just because he knew his way around dark magic and its long-term effects on human bodies.

During the long and useless discussion, Jeremy wondered if his Lord needed to know of these new developments, and how he should communicate those bits of information. It was one thing to discuss a patient with fellow healers to get a second opinion, but the oaths they all took prevented them from involving others in any way if there wasn’t a need for their help for the sake of the patient.

In the end it was decided to speak with Mr. Dumbledore, instruct the people responsible for his care, and to repeat the tests determining the levels of harmful magic in his blood. Not what Jeremy would have preferred, but better than what some of the others had wanted to do.
With a sigh Severus stepped over the threshold into his and Sonja’s quarters. The last staff meeting before the holidays had just ended, and it had been much too long. At least the train had made it back to London safely, and most of the students had left the castle until the start of the next year.

Throwing his teaching robes over to one of the hooks by the door, using a little magic to make sure it landed safely and didn’t fall to the floor, Severus walked deeper into his home, already making plans for a lazy evening with his wife.

As this year not one of his younger Slytherins had opted to stay over the holidays, he didn’t have many responsibilities. Only some of those having their OWLs and NEWTs this year had decided to stay determined to dedicate the time to their studies. Maybe Sonja and he could make a few visits to the manor, get to know the elves better, and pick out what rooms they would like to renovate first. On the other hand, the fact that there were no students at the school he needed to keep an eye on all the time meant that he had no excuse to stay away from the many events he had been invited to since he had claimed his title.

It seemed there rarely was a blessing without a blemish attached as well.

But there on the settee in front of the brightly burning fire sat one such rare blessing. Sonja was reading by the fire, wrapped in a warm blanket, intently focused on the book in her hands. Smiling at the welcome sight, Severus walked over. “Love, do you want a glass of wine? I was just about to order one up from the kitchens.”

Sonja looked up, smiling a little nervous smile which instantly set Severus on edge. “No wine for me, please. But I would like a hot chocolate and an apple.”

“Is everything all right, love?” A few quick steps had Severus at his wife’s side where he sank down to his knees faster than he ever did before his Lord.

“I think.” Another trembling smile was aimed at Severus. “But I would like for you to cast a diagnostic spell at me. I don’t know the name, only that it exists. I have heard enough people talk of it to know that much.”

“Is something wrong? Don’t you feel well? I can get Madame Pomfrey down here to look at you.” Severus felt his heart racing in his chest, almost as if it were trying to break free. He couldn’t lose his love. He was sure he wouldn’t survive if he lost her.

“No, there is nothing wrong. Please calm down, Severus. I’m perfectly fine. I just want to know if what I suspect, is true. We can go out and get a muggle pregnancy test, but I think if you know the charm I was talking about, that would be so much faster.” She almost laughed at his frantic behaviour and it took Severus a moment to comprehend what she was talking about. But when he realized what it was she had said, he sat down on the floor heavily, feeling faint.

“Now you look like I need to fetch Madame Pomfrey,” Sonja laughed, but the fact that she still sounded a little nervous soothed Severus’ frayed nerves.

“I’m fine, love. And I know the charm, so no need to involve anyone else at this moment.” But Severus still needed to rest a moment before he was able to cast the charm so they would know for sure. Once they had their answer they settled into the settee, Severus with a fine glass of red wine, Sonja with a cup of creamy hot chocolate, wrapped in the blanket and content to cuddle while they wrapped their minds around the changes that would come into their lives all too soon.
I fear the next few chapters will be slow again :D there is so much that has to happen during the holidays. But I have been looking forward to this part of the story, so it will be fun to finally write it.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Repairs

Chapter Notes

I everyone! Thanks so much to everyone writing comments and reviews. Your ideas and questions help me a great deal. All the encouragement helps me write even on days I'm not all that inspired. So thank you all very much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thursday, 21th of December

Harry had just moments ago woken up from a restful sleep in his own bed, in his own room, at home in Griffin House. It was such a strange concept still. The last time he had been here he still had felt so much more conflicted over the fact that he had been adopted. That now the man who had killed Harry’s parents was his new father.

But in the meantime so much else had happened. Marvolo had visited the Quidditch game Harry had played in. Had included him in important events, kept him informed. Harry felt respected as an almost adult. Not treated like a child as Mrs. Weasley and most of the professors tended to do.

In a slightly disgruntled mood, Harry exited his walk-in closet. He had way too many clothes, and he was sure Marvolo was using each and every opportunity he could to get even more of them made and added to the pile. The reason for this strange behaviour was still a mystery, though.

The evening before, Harry had tried to argue that they had bought warm winter robes and clothes in Hogsmeade, and that there was no reason to buy even more now. But Marvolo and the tailor had ganged up on him, claiming that Harry had grown since then – Harry was happy that this was even true – and that it was unseemly to be walking around with robes and trousers too short by even a fraction of an inch.

Harry still felt it was ridiculous to buy new clothes just because they started to get a little short – and the fact that the supposedly too-short clothes were not removed from his wardrobe was one big argument in Harry’s favour – but he had been overruled.

The fact that the trousers of fine wool, the silken shirt, a knit vest, and robes of a heavy woollen cloth – all perfectly colour coordinated of course – felt so incredibly good when worn just added to the strangeness. After a few months of school uniforms and robes it felt strange all anew that he now had well fitting, new, high-quality clothes to call his own.

But at the moment, the fact that he was dressed as posh as a Malfoy wasn’t the most pressing problem.

It was late. He had slept in. And Harry wasn’t sure that it was okay to get to breakfast so late.

He guessed that Marvolo would have sent one of the elves if it was a problem, but he couldn’t get rid of the nigling worry in his stomach.

The formal dining room was empty, so Harry walked past it towards the door to the kitchen. The
smell of breakfast came from there, and as he reached the door he could hear tea being poured into a cup and the sizzling sound of bacon being cooked. Maybe breakfast wasn’t finished yet.

“Good morning, Henry. Come in, have a seat and fill a plate!” Marvolo looked and sounded as if he was in a good mood today. He was holding the Daily Prophet, just lowering it enough to look over the pages towards the door, where Harry was standing feeling quite awkward.

With a deep breath and a shaky smile Harry walked into the room. “Good morning, sir. I’m sorry I’m late.”

But before he could really start in on his apology, Marvolo already had waved one hand as if to banish the matter from the room. “This is the first day of a holiday that won’t be much of a holiday at all. I thought you deserved to sleep in for once.” The red-eyed wizard impatiently waved his hand, moving Harry’s chair away from the table, clearly ordering him to sit down already.

So Harry did exactly that, and started to fill his plate with scrambled eggs, some of the freshly cooked bacon that Flimm levitated over to him, a slice of toasted bread covered in honey, and some cut-up apple slices.

It was a peaceful breakfast, and as had been the custom even over at Theo’s place, they shared the newspaper, once Harry had eaten a decent portion.

“Do you have any plans for today?” Marvolo wanted to know at one point, taking another of the small cakes that Flimm had served them.

Harry shook his head, mouth still filled with his last bite of bacon and eggs. Once he had chewed and swallowed he answered. “I hadn’t thought that far yet. I somehow got the impression that most of the holiday would be occupied with events we would have to visit, so I mainly worried how to pack all the homework, and all the revising Hermione wants me to do, in the time of the holidays as well.” In fact, Harry had feared that the train ride back to Hogwarts would be the moment he would get to finish his homework. Even if he now didn’t need to sneak his school stuff into his room, if there wasn’t any time to do the essays, then there was no time.

“We do have quite a few events planned. I will give you a schedule at dinner this evening. But there should be enough time for your studying and a few visits to friends,” Marvolo said casually, folding the sports section of the newspaper to place it on the table next to his plate.

Harry perked up. Time for a few visits to his friends? That sounded much better than he had feared. Maybe an afternoon at the Burrow wasn’t that far out of the realm of possibilities after all. “Can I visit Sirius? Maybe even today?” Yesterday on their talk over the mirror, Sirius had gushed over the motorbike he had bought just a few days back, and now had managed to get it into one of the unused rooms to work on it. Harry was eager to see it and hear more of Sirius’ plans on what to do.

“If your godfather is free, I have no objections.” Marvolo nodded, filling his cup with more tea. “So go ahead and ask him.”

With a big smile Harry finished his orange juice – a nice change of pace from the normally ever present pumpkin-juice – before he stood from the table to hurry to his room where both mirrors were placed on his desk.

Harry really hoped that Sirius had time.
Pacing impatiently in front of the floo, Sirius drank his coffee as fast as was possible. Just a moment before Harry had called over the mirror asking if he could visit today. And of course he could visit. Sirius hadn’t had anything special planned today, only to relax and unwind after so many social events he had had to attend.

Doing so with his godson would be even better than doing it alone.

The cup of dark coffee had been drained for some time before Harry stumbled out of the floo, grinning like mad. “Sirius!” the teen cried out, sprinting over to Sirius, enveloping him in a big hug. With a big grin on his own face, Sirius folded his arms around the still lanky but now at least quite a bit taller teen.

“I’m happy to see you too, pup.” Stepping back, releasing the other, Sirius clapped one hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Do you want to eat breakfast with me?”

Harry gave him a sheepish grin. “I just had breakfast. I slept in today, and came here just after I had finished eating.”

“Well, then you'll have to watch me eating breakfast,” Sirius decided, and slung an arm across his godson’s shoulders. They went down to the kitchen where a nice breakfast was still laid out on the table.

“What are your plans for the holidays, Harry?” Sirius asked so he would be able to eat and listen to Harry, avoiding an awkward silence.

“Well, Ron invited me over to the burrow and I hope I can go. Because – as you should know – there are many events I'll have to go to. The ball Malfoy is giving, the small gathering hosted by Neville’s grandmother, and a few others.” His mouth full, Sirius nodded, and rolled his eyes. He had to go to all of those too. At least he knew Harry would be there as well. Maybe he could get some more time to spend together out of it. “Lord Lestrange has invited us over to the school he has started this autumn. They’ll have a small crafts fair, and a play as well. I think that'll be fun, because Hermione and her parents will be there too.” Sirius nodded, taking another fork full of egg and bacon into his mouth.

Harry sipped at the tea Sirius had pressed on him and seemed to be thinking what to say next. “Then there is revision… OWL year is really hard, I tell you. I wonder why I never noticed how stressed the fifth-years were each year. And homework, of course. I never gave Hermione much credit, but she's right, doing it as soon as possible is less stressful.”

Sirius made a face, while Harry chuckled, a little embarrassed. “I can tell you, your mother would agree, and Moony certainly will be proud to hear that you take your studies that serious.” Sirius made a face. He never had given much thought to homework, studying, or his OWLs, at least not until he had to. But now he was the adult, and he knew that it was his job to encourage Harry to study, learn, and do his homework in time. It was just really going against all he held dear. “How are classes going?”

“Fine. I’m happy I changed Divination for Ancient Runes. Not making up predictions on how evil, mishaps, and death will fall on me, is a relief. Defence is mostly theory, and I’m glad Hermione came up with the idea of the Defence Club. It gives me a lot of opportunity to practice my spells.”

While Sirius ate his breakfast – throwing in a question now and then – Harry happily told him about his studies, a topic they normally skipped during their calls over the mirror.
Then Harry got a gleam in his eyes and asked in a teasing tone, “Are you going to show me the bike you've found to tinker with?”

With a gleam in his own eyes, Sirius stood from the table, leaving it to Kreacher to clean up after them, waving for Harry to follow him. “I repurposed my mother’s favourite parlour into a work room. I think the bike I got is a real beauty. Sadly, the previous owner had no sense at all, leaving her in a terrible state, but that gives me so much more to do.”

Now it was up to Sirius to prattle on and on about the bike, his plans, and what he would do first. Harry followed him, listening intently. Once they reached the workroom, thick tarps covering the floor, Sirius started on the spot to work on the motorbike, getting Harry to help, handing him things he asked for. They spent the entire morning working and talking, even skipping lunch. Sirius felt reminded of the days he had spent working on his first motorcycle together with his best friend and chosen brother James, but at the same time it was different, as Harry was so much younger than Sirius, and not at all a carbon copy of his father.

ooOoo

After a wonderful morning working with their hands to renovate the old, rusty motorbike, Harry walked into one of the renovated bathrooms in Grimmauld Place to get rid of the grease and oil he had on his hands and – inexplicably – his face.

Sirius had hurried to get some tea served for them in the one room upstairs that was cleaned and renovated the most. It was the parlour with the tapestry inside, but it had big windows to the street and the back garden, making it one of the cheerier places. Which didn’t say too much.

After getting the stubborn stains from his skin, Harry made his way over to where he could hear Kreacher puttering around with the delicate china which had come with the house.

“That smells delicious, Kreacher,” Harry complimented the moment he stepped into the room. Flimm was always happy to receive some compliments about his work, and Dobby for sure always almost burst with pride when Harry had said he was doing something good. Maybe Harry should go visit the elf in the kitchen. He hadn’t seen the bubbly Dobby since he had helped Harry with the second task during the tournament.

Kreacher’s reaction was a sneer, but thankfully he didn’t say or mutter anything. So Harry sat down on a settee, adding sugar and cream to his cup of tea. They talked a bit more about the motorbike and Sirius’ plans for it. Charming it so it could fly sounded like fun, but Harry worried that it would be against Ministry regulations, and that would get Sirius in trouble.

Finally Harry contemplated the old tapestry with its many burned spots. “Have you found anyone who thought it possible to repair that thing?” It would be nice to get all those burned from the tapestry because they somehow had offended the family, onto it again.

Sirius shook his head, sighing. “No. Each expert I had here claimed it was impossible to get it repaired. Some even claimed any attempt to reverse the damage would only make it worse. Not sure if I really care about the risk, but I don’t know how to find an heir without that thing.”

Harry smirked. “Not interested in going the traditional route?” he teased and got a mock scowl back for his effort.
“When have I ever done something the traditional way? And marrying some woman is the last thing I want to do at the moment.” Sirius slumped down in his seat, scowling at the ceiling.

Harry played with his teacup, pondering something in his mind. He hadn’t had the opportunity to test it yet, but if Sirius really wasn’t concerned over maybe ruining the tapestry, it might be worth a shot.

“Maybe there is a way.” Harry began tentatively, folding his hands and leaning forward, placing his elbows on his knees. “I got a book for my birthday, detailing how magic can do incredible things when worked in Parseltongue.”

Sirius looked at Harry, a question clear in his eyes.

“I haven’t really tried it yet. Too much schoolwork, and too many… people around. But if there’s enough motivation and a clear intent, it should be possible to do many things that there’s no way to do any other way.” Harry shrugged helplessly. “There’s also a chapter about problems, and gruesome stories about what can go wrong. But I guess this is a relatively safe project?” The last came out sounding much more like a question, and Harry really didn’t feel that confident any longer. Sirius’ look was just so sceptical.

“Maybe I could try with something simpler first?” As he said this, Harry’s mind already was racing, searching for something that he could do to prove that his idea could work. “Like turning this spoon green?” he offered up his first idea.

Sirius sat up, clearly considering the idea. “Can you tell me about how this will work? Or is that too close to family magic to talk about?”

Harry opened his mouth and then closed it again, just nodding, as he realised that this was indeed something he couldn’t talk about with someone not belonging to the family. “I can tell you that only the object, or being, the spell is aimed at can suffer from any bad consequences. And as long as I have a clear intent and a clear goal in mind, there shouldn’t be any big problems.” The book had compared the magic of intent to what happened with accidental magic in young children. They almost always had a very clear intent. They wanted to have something, or needed to be safe, warm, they needed light… it didn’t happen often that they were confused over what they wanted. Once the needs got more complicated, or conflicted with others, instances of accidental magic occurred less often. Usually with the increasing age of the children.

All Harry needed was a clear image of what he wanted to happen, and a clear desire for it to happen. And he was reasonably sure that he had both. He wanted for Sirius to no longer have to worry about finding an heir, because he knew without a doubt if the tapestry could give him a name or not. So Harry wanted it to work as it had been intended on creation. Sirius nodded slowly. “Alright, Harry, you can test it. First on this spoon, and if that works, you can test it on the tapestry. I’ve even considered just burning it, so I can concentrate on something different. Like convincing Dora that now that her mother and she are back in the family, she should accept the position as heiress.” Harry snorted. Never would Dora – or rather Tonks – agree to something like that. He hadn’t spoken with her often, but what he had been told of her by Sirius didn’t point at someone willing to put up with the norms and demands of society.

But now wasn’t the time to discuss this. And Sirius even knew all of that. So Harry got his wand out and placed the spoon on the table in front of himself. He thought what words he should use, before he pointed his wand at the spoon and concentrated, clearly picturing the outcome he wanted to see when he was finished.

:.Spoon turn green:. Harry barely registered Sirius shuddering at the hissing sounds of
Parseltongue, grinning in wonder as the spoon turned a bright leaf green. “Look, it worked!”

Sirius nodded, clearly not really that impressed. “I could have done that with a simple colour-switching spell.”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah. But a normal Finite shouldn’t work on this.” At least the book had said that magic worked this way wasn’t easily countered by normal means used by a witch or wizard without the use of Parseltongue.

Sirius raised a brow and got out his own wand. Pointing it at the green spoon on the table, Sirius cast a wordless Finite without any effect. Frowning a little, Sirius sat a little bit straighter, aimed his wand again and spoke aloud this time. “Finite incantatem!”

The expression on his godfather’s face turned to impressed. “If you can return the spoon to its original colour, I will admit that it might work.”

Turning several possible phrases over in his mind, Harry concentrated on what he wanted to happen. The spoon should be silver again after he was finished. How could he express that in a few simple words?

.:Green vanish, reveal original colour again:. It wasn’t all that short, but as the green slowly shrank back, revealing the silver colour of the spoon again, it was clear that it had worked. Had the selection of the verb had an effect on how the change had happened? An instant turning at first, a slow change back? It was something that Harry could consider.

But now he had to find the words to best impress how he wanted this to work. If Sirius allowed him to try.

Pleading green eyes turned to Sirius, who sat there, eyes glued to the spoon which now was again of a silver colour. Slowly grey eyes rose from the unassuming piece of cutlery, taking in the young wizard sitting there tense and waiting. “That’s really something. You think you can do this?” Harry nodded. “You’re sure there is no danger for you?” Harry nodded again. “Then you may try.”

Harry stood, walked over to the tapestry, and eyed it while his mind was whirling. He wanted this tapestry to be whole again, magic and material. He wanted it to work again, to be like it would have been if it hadn’t been damaged. He wanted the damage to vanish, leaving the tapestry whole again.

That might work.

Ignoring the shaking in his hand, Harry pointed his wand at the tapestry, picturing it without the burn marks, no person removed by crude means and for petty reasons. He took a deep breath and blanked out the piercing gaze of his godfather that he could feel on his back. There was no benefit in being distracted now. With the now practiced patterns of a relaxing breathing exercise, Harry calmed his racing heart before he started speaking. Or rather, hissing.

.:Tapestry be whole again, as if damage was never done:. Harry felt power rush through him, leaving him dizzy and his eyes watering. Suddenly he was sitting on the floor, limp fingers almost losing their grip on his wand. How had he ended up down here?

Before Harry could manage to clear his mind enough to comprehend what had happened, Sirius was crouching next to him, sounding troubled. “Harry! Are you okay? You said there was no danger for you! Did you even know? Maybe you’re more like your father than I had thought! Such recklessness!”
That had been harder than he had expected. Maybe he should have anticipated something like this. Changing the colour of something was easy, repairing such a powerful, ancient artefact was a little bit harder. Or maybe, rather, a lot harder.

Smiling a little ruefully, Harry reassured Sirius, “I’m alright, just a little dizzy. Maybe that was a bigger effort than I had thought it would be. I have felt worse, after an afternoon trying to learn the patronus charm with Remus.” He had been two years younger then, and there had been a mock Dementor affecting him, but that wasn’t really all that important now, was it?

“Did it work?”

Giving him an unimpressed look, Sirius turned his body so he could look at the tapestry. He snorted. “It did work. But now isn’t the time to look at the impossible magical feat you just achieved. Now we will get you onto the settee, and have you eat a big piece of chocolate while we wait for Remus to come here. If he says you’re okay, then it’s fine. If he says you’re not okay, we’ll call a healer.” There was something like steel in Sirius’ voice and Harry wisely decided not to challenge him on this. And chocolate sounded really good anyway.

oooOOooo

Severus had apparated them over to the manor – after pressing Sonja into taking a stomach soother, as she had had a queasy stomach for several days now – and was now watching with amusement in his eyes as she walked through the old house, telling the three elves which rooms she wanted to be renovated first.

The fact that the three small elves were almost jumping up and down, so happy and eager to help their Lord and Lady feel at home, was as amusing as Sonja’s businesslike tone in ordering what room was to be renovated first.

“What do you think, Severus, what colours should we have in the dining room? A light sage green, or maybe a golden yellow?” Sonja turned to him, arching a brow the moment his amusement was spotted.

“You know how my quarters are arranged, love. I’m not really a man known for his taste in interior decoration. But I like references to potions, and am a Slytherin. So, greens?” He really wasn’t sure what colours would look good, and as long as Sonja didn’t plan to decorate everything in the red and gold of Gryffindor he would be content.

Sonja laughed. “I’m amazed that there really is something most men I have met seem to share.” Now Severus was the one arching a brow in a silent question. With a shrug Sonja answered. “I haven’t met many men who were interested in decorating a home. Picking colours and whatever else is necessary.”

She walked over to him, pressing her smaller body to his tall frame. “Or am I mistaken?”

Closing his arms around her, smiling down at her mischievous expression, Severus gave a slight shake of his head. “You are not. I’m really not interested. But that doesn’t mean that I have no opinion... So please, no Gryffindor red.”

The peals of Sonja’s laughter echoed through the halls. “No worries, love. I’m not that fond of red as a colour for walls, rugs, or drapes. But I like greens and blues, and maybe a few subtle yellow
and orange hues for the rooms with the furniture of that beautiful honey-coloured wood.”

Severus knew that he needed to organise the renovation of Prince Manor, but he really wasn’t all that interested in the particulars, details, and all the small decisions it would require. It seemed that he had been lucky enough to find a woman who not only loved him, but was willing to take care of these things for him.

“Cherry, please start with the formal rooms and the kitchen. Until the summer, we most likely will spend most of our time at Hogwarts. As Head of House Severus needs to be available to his students most of the day, including nights. After that, you will start on the master bedroom and the nursery.” The big eyes of all three elves got even bigger as they easily made the connection why the nursery was among the first rooms to be renovated. “Clean up all the rooms enough that they don’t look as neglected as they do now. Severus, why don’t you take Basil out into the garden to explain how you want your ingredients garden organized, and which lab to clean first? I’m sure you’ll enjoy planning your lab much more than walking through all the bedrooms, parlours, and studies with me.” Her grin was impish.

Severus’ first instinct was to stay with his wife. She was unable to cast any spells, practically defenceless if she should come across something dangerous. And the next thing he did was beating that instinct down with common sense. She was an intelligent woman, who had lived in the magical world for most of her life. She wouldn’t risk touching something that seemed ominous. And she wasn’t alone. Two dedicated house-elves would be by her side, eager to protect the Lady of the Manor and the heir even now growing inside of her. He would make her feel like she was incompetent if he insisted on being by her side all the time because she wasn’t able to look after herself.

He took a deep breath, checked his occlumency shields and then smiled at his wife. “If you need me for anything – like deciding on a green for the living room – send one of the elves. I will be in the garden.”

They parted with a kiss, and Severus could hear Sonja giving orders until he had reached one of the doors leading outside. “I wish for all the common herbs and plants to be available in the garden. No reason to not grow them in my own garden now that I have the space. One of the greenhouses will be dedicated to plants from the Mediterranean.” Sonja had been right. Even though he was no herbologist, he was a Potions Master and knew enough about the magical and mundane plants he needed in his craft to have strong opinions on how a garden should be planned. He would have a fun day outdoors, even with the weather as bad as it was in this part of the country.

When Remus arrived at Grimmauld Place he found a nervously pacing Sirius in the parlour with that hideous tapestry, and a sleeping Harry on one of the settees.

“What happened?” Remus asked of his oldest friend once he had taken in the room and the mood.

Sirius waved a hand in the direction of the tapestry and stopped his pacing to turn so he could see Remus. “Harry repaired the tapestry. I gave him chocolate because he was looking a little peaky, shaky on his feet… then he laid down and was asleep in seconds. I think we need to call a healer.” Sirius yanked his hair out of his face with one hand, nervously carding that hand through his dark hair more than once, truly looking worried and lost.
Not concentrating on the fact that his friend just had claimed that Harry had done what several expert had claimed to be impossible, Remus got his wand out and stepped over to the settee where Harry was lying curled up under one of the new blankets Sirius had gotten for the house.

He cast a charm and started to talk just to hopefully soothe his nervous friend. “Madam Pomfrey made sure that each teacher knows how to cast the basic diagnostic charms. Especially the charm to check for magical exhaustion. She explained to me the day she instructed me on how to cast it that it was so we would be able to distinguish between those students who didn’t get enough sleep from those who were over-exerting themselves with casting spells. She made it quite clear that we shouldn’t send those staying up too late to her.” He wasn’t all that experienced with this charm – it didn’t happen all too often that one of the students used more magic than they should – but these readings didn’t looked too bad.

“Stop fretting, Sirius. A slight case of magical exhaustion. Harry will be fine. A nap and an early night today should be enough to get him back on his feet.” Remus took the few steps to stand next to his friend, clasping his shoulder. “You said Harry repaired the tapestry?”

With a distracted nod, Sirius turned and walked over to said tapestry, Remus following close behind.

“I haven’t really looked at it yet. I only noticed that all the burned spots were gone after Harry sat down on the floor. Claimed he was dizzy…” Sirius trailed off and stopped a step before the wall, his grey eyes wandering over the now no longer burned tapestry.

Remus stood next to his friend and started to inspect the tapestry. All the burned spots were gone. There was Alphard, the uncle of Sirius who once had given him money, Andromeda as well as her husband and daughter now were displayed, alongside Bellatrix, her husband – him with a date of death – Narcissa, her husband and son Draco. Other spots showed small portraits. All in all it seemed fuller, especially in the generations which were still alive today. And there was Sirius. Not sure if he was seeing correctly, Remus rubbed his eyes, and then looked again.

“Who is Olivienne Moreau?” Remus asked – unsure how to pronounce it – pointing at the place near of Sirius’ own portrait where a young woman was woven into the tapestry. There was a line between Sirius and her and then another line going down to split and connect two more portraits to them.

“Who?” Sirius asked, turning his eyes from where he had been looking at some older relatives, to where several people had been burned off in each generation.

“Olivienne Moreau.” Remus repeated, deciding on a French pronunciation. “And her children – twins – who look a lot like you.” Remus had to smirk. It seemed as if Sirius had bungled the contraception charm at least once.

Sirius reverently stretched his hand in the direction of the small group of portraits among the sea of all the others. “I’m a father?” He sounded totally shocked, his hand trembling.

“Harry did an excellent job with the repair,” Remus murmured approvingly. “The colours are really vibrant, there isn’t a speck of dust… it’s as good as new!” And the tapestry really was. Remus wondered how it was possible that Harry had managed to do this when all the experts – or so-called experts, Sirius had become truly desperate at the end – had declared the endeavour was pointless.

“Why did she never contact me?” asked Sirius, his eyes still fixed on the place where his own likeness was connected to the three others.
“Do you remember her?” Remus asked only to be answered by a silent shake of Sirius’ head. “Then maybe she didn’t know your name either. So how could she have found you? And if she knew your name... the date of birth is after that November... so you already were in Azkaban.” It wasn’t nice to bring that fact into the discussion, but it was a fact. Sirius had been in Azkaban when the twin girls had been born.

Sirius nodded numbly. It seemed as if this was a little bit much for him. “Come, let’s go to the kitchen, get you a drink. And then you will contact a private investigator to search for the mother of your children. I would guess she might be French? Or maybe from Canada? Or Switzerland?” With a last look at the peacefully sleeping Harry, Remus guided his old friend down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Once he had Sirius sitting in a chair at the table he started to brew a nice pot of tea. “At least now you have found two possible heirs. If they are willing to move to our nice foggy Great Britain.”

The look Sirius threw at Remus for that quip only made the werewolf chuckle. It was always fun to tease a friend.

ooooOOooo

Marvolo had spend most of the morning with paperwork and preparations. Paperwork because he had to do it sometime, and preparations because the 21st of December was a good – safe – day to perform rituals of high complexity.

He had decided to test his ritual to move a horcrux from its container to another today just for that reason. These plans had influenced him in allowing Henry a whole day with his godfather this early in the holidays. They also had caused him to decline a few invitations from woefully muggle-oriented, so-called light families. Luckily, most of those holding seats in the Wizengamot never held functions on those days traditionally used for rituals, or celebrations of magic. Not all of them – probably less than even a handful – observed those rituals any longer, but it was traditional to leave those days for personal affairs, so those that wanted to could perform their rituals in private.

Because of the real possibility that something might go wrong, Marvolo had called Malcolm Greengrass here to watch the proceedings and to provide help if needed. Of course he had made the man swear an oath making sure he couldn’t speak about what he was to learn this day, if it wasn’t paramount for him to share the information to ensure Marvolo’s survival. Marvolo felt reasonably sure that there would be no need for help, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

“Are you ready for me to begin, Malcolm?” Marvolo asked, slipping the robes he had thrown over the simple long shirt made from thin linen cloth he was wearing as his only clothing down his arms.

“I am, my Lord,” was the shaky answer of his healer. The soft sounds of glass phials being moved around signalled that the Healer had everything at hand that might be of use should something go wrong.

Taking up the diadem – the part of his soul encased within was going to be moved today – and a gold-plated hollow sphere made from clay – where the soul piece was to be moved to – Marvolo carefully stepped into the interconnecting circles he had drawn with chalk onto the smooth stone floor of the ritual room he had found and cleaned out in his Headquarters.
It had taken some considerable effort to make all the lines as clear and precise as he could. Drawing with chalk drenched in some potions wasn’t really all that easy, as the material got more temperamental and unpredictable in drawing on stone, leading to irregular lines and dangerous gaps if one wasn’t really careful. One of the reasons so many people get hurt trying complicated rituals to reach a goal were these difficulties. But Marvolo had worked highly focused, and later checked the ritual circle several times until he was sure there weren’t any errors.

No, if something was going to go wrong, it would be because he had made an error in the creation of the ritual, not in the performing of it.

Carefully placing his bare feet so as not to smudge any of the lines, Marvolo moved through the circle, placing the two objects to be used in their appropriate places, before he moved to the blank place in the dense markings where he would be sitting during the ritual.

Sitting down cross-legged, placing his hands on his knees, Marvolo started on his breathing exercises to get into the right frame of mind for this ritual. After several minutes he started to chant the words he had come up with for this. Small bowls filled with specific herbs set up at strategic places started to smoke as the herbs caught fire simultaneously, filling the room with flickering light – in addition to the white magical lights hovering in the four corners – and a sweet scent that was tart at the same time.

Up until now all seemed to go as planned. Focusing on what he had to do, Marvolo changed the chant from the one to start the ritual to the one designed to extract the soul piece from its current container, which promptly started to glow softly in an eerie red.

When the red glow separated slowly from the diadem, coalescing into a small cloud over the object of precious metal and stones, a feeling of pride coursed through Marvolo. It was working! The cloud was smaller than he would have thought, but in the end, he hadn’t been all that observant when he had moved this part of his soul out of his body and into the diadem. The pain and ripping had distracted him.

Then suddenly everything went wrong. Instead of moving over to the second object, prepared to accept the soul piece as its new container, the cloud floated over to where Marvolo was sitting, frozen to his spot in fear of causing bigger problems, seemingly following a straight line.

Slightly panicking, Marvolo changed the chant to the one intended to help the soul piece to settle into its new container. Those were based on the original words of the horcrux creation ritual, as placing the piece in a container was a main part of that ritual. But it looked like the container would be Marvolo’s body instead of the sphere of clay.

The moment the small cloud made contact with Marvolo’s torso, right where the heart was located, pain shot out through his whole body. It made him falter in his chant, voice cut off, a cry of pain wrenched from his throat. Then he fell to his side, shaking, all his nerves burning.

Was this as bad as the evening he had been reborn? Or as bad as the moment the piece of his soul that had been contained in the ring had returned to him? It was incredibly hard to measure pain in any way objectively.

For the moment not willing to try moving on his own, Marvolo only concentrated on breathing, and contemplating what had gone wrong. The part of extracting the piece from its container had worked perfectly, but binding it to a new container had failed, instead moving it back to its original container. If he was willing to call his body a container.

Maybe he would need another death to bind the soul piece to anything other than his own body?
And would he need to change his approach at all? From where he lay, panting, the diadem seemed unharmed. Maybe this was all he really needed?

While he was concentrating on his breathing and thinking, a frantic Malcolm had decided the ritual had ended in failure, hurrying over to his Lord.

ooOoo

It had been terrifying to look on as his Lord performed a ritual to move a piece of his soul from one inanimate container – the diadem of Ravenclaw! – to another. That something like breaking one's soul and extracting it from the body was even possible, Malcolm never would have thought. That his Lord was working to dismantle the precautions he had taken to prevent his own death was another baffling fact.

But now he knew what had caused the bad reaction during that planning meeting back at the end of the summer. The claim it had been a reaction to old wards being broken had never felt really true. But Malcolm was neither an expert in wards nor an expert in obscure dark magic, so he hadn’t questioned the story he had been told.

But now he was crouching next to his Lord, who was curled on his side on the floor, slowly pouring a strong pain relieving potion into the whimpering man’s mouth. As a Healer he got to see many people at their worst, but it always was staggering to see someone as powerful as Lord Slytherin brought so low.

“As far as I can see there are no wounds, no damage done. If the last occurrence is any indication, the pain will fade with time. If I may be so bold, I would suggest bringing you back home, where you will rest, my Lord. A good night’s sleep and another pain relieving potion should suffice, my Lord.” All the charms he had cast had given him results eerily reminiscent of the effects the Cruciatius curse had. But now wasn’t the time to ponder the medical implications of the return of a part of a soul to the original body, now was the time to get his Lord back into something resembling respectable clothing before he would escorted him back home.

Malcolm walked over to the chair next to where he had his potions set up to get the robe, shoes, and socks his Lord had worn before he had removed everything that would be not needed during the ritual. He picked the things up. It would be easier to get his Lord into the robe and shoes over where he was resting on the floor, then to somehow bring him over to where the clothes had been placed.

The chalk drawing was smeared around the place where the Dark Lord was now turned onto his back, panting, as well as the path Malcolm had taken to come to his Lord’s help.

“My Lord, I will help you dress before we will return to your home. Is this all right?” A weak nod was his answer.

So Malcolm started with the difficult task of dressing a grown man who wasn’t able to be of any assistance. This had always been a part of the healer education he hadn’t liked. Moving patients around without the aid of magic. It was so much easier to levitate someone to dress them, or to pass on the task to a medi-witch or -wizard entirely. But here for his Lord he was the only one at hand to help, and using magic might not be a good idea at the moment. When rituals went wrong, or at least not as they had been planned, adding more magic into the mix so soon – especially if the
magic wasn’t essential – was something to be avoided. After several minutes of struggling, Malcolm had wrapped the Dark Lord in his robe and moved on to put socks and shoes back onto the man.

Hopefully his Lord would be able to stand once that task was finished. There was no way Malcolm would be able to carry him to the floo if he couldn’t walk at all.

ooOoo

In a way, it was totally demeaning to need that much help from another to move around. On the other hand, he had known that this was one possible outcome and had done the ritual anyway. At least he had prepared everything required to make sure he would get the help needed. Was that a redeeming factor?

Marvolo’s mind offered up insignificant titbits and ideas to ponder while he was helpless after the ritual had derailed so completely. The pain potion was helping to dull the pain, and the random thoughts his mind was coming up with helped with ignoring the fact that one of his followers had to dress him as if he were an invalid, or a toddler.

Marvolo tried to ignore the fact he was whimpering when Malcolm hauled him upright and moved one of Marvolo’s arms over his shoulder to better support his weight on the way to the floo. Once they had managed to establish some kind of stability, Marvolo did his best to shuffle along. For the next experiment, he would make sure he could just sleep in the ritual room without moving much.

The trip by floo was quite taxing on his already strained system. Only with great difficulty did Marvolo manage to keep from throwing up. Malcolm was considerate enough to stop for a moment in their floo room so Marvolo could catch his breath.

While they were standing there, the front door was opened, and Marvolo wondered for a moment who that might be, until he realised it probably was Henry coming home from his stay with his godfather. It was already late enough for that.

If he had been capable of blushing at the moment, he would have, for fear of being seen by his son in such a weak state. He was pretty sure he did blush the moment he noticed Lord Black and Mr. Lupin were accompanying his son into the house.

Then the state of Henry registered.

“What happened to my son?” Marvolo was sure that if his voice hadn’t sounded as if he had been gargling with sand, it would have sounded much more intimidating. But the way it was, he sounded rather pitiable.

Henry looked rather sheepish where he was leaning against his godfather. Who answered instead of the teenager. “He repaired the family tapestry by hissing something at it. Harry’s fine and just needs sleep.” The tall man gave Marvolo an assessing look. “And what happened to you, Lord Slytherin?”

Before Marvolo could come up with an answer – his mind was frighteningly slow at the moment – Malcolm answered. “Lord Slytherin worked a cleansing-ritual on a historical artefact that had been cursed. He’s tired, so I suggest you help heir Slytherin up to his room and then leave.”
Marvolo was glad that they did exactly that. He was worried and curious over what exactly Henry had done using Parseltongue in casting magic, but at the moment he just wasn’t up to doing anything about those feelings. That had to wait for tomorrow.

When he was finally in his bed, staring at the ceiling, slowly slipping towards sleep, Nagini slithered into the room.

.:You both are really reckless! Why do you risk yourself? Don’t you care for me? The young one said he wanted to sleep, will you pay me some attention? You look like you’re falling asleep just now:. She slithered up on the bed and moved over so she could peer into his face.

Marvolo sighed. .:I’m sorry, my dear. But I need that sleep right now:. And then sleep claimed him while Nagini was muttering in the background, complaining in colourful language about the fact that now both her humans were here and she was ignored regardless.

Chapter End Notes

I’m not sure how to name the new twins, or where they are from. There are so many places in the world where French is spoken. So if you have any ideas, write a review I can use your help! ;)

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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History Lessons

Chapter Notes

This was no easy chapter. Lots of research and decisions. Not everything will be revealed in this chapter, but I hope you have fun reading anyway ;)
Oh, and thanks to all those offering me ideas about where the twins could be from and how to name them. Some of you had me confused for a while because they offered up names for boys ;)

Sorry that it's a day late. Friday was a little hectic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, 22nd of December

Heavy trepidation rested in Harry’s stomach on his way down to breakfast this morning after his stupid leap without thinking first the previous afternoon. Or at least Marvolo would call it stupid, that was as sure as the rising of the sun at the beginning of a day.

And at the same time Harry was curious. He hadn’t been in the best shape when he had come home yesterday, but it had been clear as day that Marvolo had been even worse off. The healer had said something about a ritual to remove a curse from an object. Had Marvolo tried the ritual he had been working on? If so, he seemed to have been careful, but whether he had been successful wasn’t as certain.

The moment Harry stepped into the room, the peaceful picture he saw made him blink rapidly in surprise. Marvolo was sitting in his usual place, newspaper folded so he could read it, teacup on its saucer floating near his right hand so he could easily reach it to take a sip.

With cautious steps Harry walked in – thankfully his exhaustion hadn’t translated into any sourness – and spoke the usual greeting. “Good morning, Marvolo. You look better.” Harry winced internally, that hadn’t been the best idea. Maybe he still was more tired than he had thought.

“You look better as well.” There was a wry smile on Marvolo’s face. It seemed that he saw the irony in the situation.

So Harry walked over to his place, first filling his own cup with tea, then taking one of the Belgian waffles and pouring chocolate sauce over it in abundance, before he selected a few of the ripe and sweet-looking fruit offered as well. There always were sweet options on the table whenever he ate with Marvolo, and today Harry felt like he needed the extra energy.

“I hope I don’t need to explain why making your first forays into the realm of intent-based magic casting without proper supervision was a bad choice?” There was no trace of the threat in the question that Harry had anticipated. For a moment Harry stopped chewing, he was so surprised.

When the pointed look registered, he quickly resumed chewing before he swallowed the tasty bite of waffle. “There was an adult present, and an adult wizard at that. And Sirius was on the list of
approved adults to supervise when I try new things.” Harry knew it was a weak attempt. The list had been given with the condition that they only were allowed to supervise when they could perform whatever spell he wanted to learn themselves. And beside Harry himself, there was only Marvolo able to speak Parseltongue. Not daring to look up, in fear he would blush because of that weak excuse, Harry concentrated on his plate and the food on it.

The chuckle from the other made clear that he didn’t fool Marvolo with that explanation. And Harry hadn’t thought about the rules at all the moment he had thought of how he might be able to repair the tapestry and help Sirius. He looked up again as Marvolo asked in true interest. “Why did you choose to start with something that big and complex, anyway? I remember that there is a recommendation what to try first. And I remember a nice few hot days at Hogwarts where my milk just was that few essential degrees colder because I practiced with changing the temperature of liquids.”

Harry set down his cup and shook his head. “That wasn’t the first I tried. Before that I changed the colour of a spoon, to green and back. It was really easy. Easier than it was when I was learning the colour-changing charm.” And it had been. But that could be because he didn’t have to move his wand in such a complicated pattern, changing the speed in the middle of the motion.

Marvolo folded the newspaper and placed it on the empty chair on his left, sighing. “To avoid further misunderstandings, you are not to practice wielding magic only directed by your intent and parseltongue without my presence. Is that clear?”

Harry nodded. That was a lot less harsh than he had feared, even as there was steel in Marvolo’s voice. “Yes, sir.” Then he hesitated a moment before he decided to ask, after all he was really curious and it did affect him. Up until now, Marvolo had had a tendency to tell him things other adults always had been trying to shield him from. “Healer Greengrass wasn’t all that clear on what you were doing yesterday to make you look so… worn out.” That wasn’t really a question, but outside of a classroom situation Harry hadn’t really had an opportunity to learn how to ask questions of adults. And for some reason Harry didn’t want to think too much about, Sirius didn’t truly count.

“I tried the ritual I have been working on to move a soul piece out of a horcrux and move it to a new container.” For a moment Harry was baffled – that was an answer he hadn’t really anticipated – but then he found his orientation again. It seemed that the honesty they had shared in their conversation over the mirrors hadn’t been lost now that they both were in the same room again.

“What went wrong?” Because Harry was sure something had gone wrong the day before. There was no other way that Marvolo would have looked so bad off, otherwise.

“Not as much as could have. The Diadem of Ravenclaw is in perfect condition. Or at least it looked that way yesterday. But I didn’t actually manage to move the soul piece from one container to the other. Instead it returned to me, with much the same effects as when the piece from the ring was forcibly returned to my body.” Harry felt a cold chill run down his spine. That sounded like a dangerous failure. “But I wonder if there is even a need to make the move to another container perfect… I think I should concentrate on perfecting the part of removing the soul-shard without causing any kind of damage to the container.”

Harry watched as Marvolo’s red eyes slid to where his longer hair now hid the scar a little better than before. Yeah, Harry certainly wouldn’t object if Marvolo concentrated on making sure that the extraction didn’t harm the container. It might be a little bit selfish – knowing that Marvolo got hurt wasn’t nice – but when the time came to extract the tiny fragment of soul from him, he certainly wanted to know that it was safe to do so. He certainly didn’t want to die because someone
decided that Marvolo had to die and killing Harry was the only way.

So they got into talking about rituals in general, what there was, why they were so dangerous, and how Marvolo had been sure it was safe enough to try what he had made, because Harry really felt that it had been uncharacteristically reckless. By that point Nagini had slithered into the room, agreeing fervently with Harry, prompting Marvolo to explain a lot more about the process he had followed until he had felt safe enough to try.

When Harry went to prepare for their outing planned for the day, he felt somewhat better. Knowing that there was a curse-breaker Marvolo had looking at what he came up with, discussing it with another person, and that Healer Greengrass had been there and would be there for any further attempts was reassuring as well.

But for the moment, Harry had to dress for a visit to one of the Potter businesses he still knew too little about. And that was the reason they were visiting today.

oooOOooo

“Stop pacing, Basti.” Rodolphus looked over to his older brother, before picking up the shirt from his bed. “We need to get dressed and then we need to get into the right frame of mind. There is no time for worrying.”

Rabastan turned to his brother, revealing the face that had drastically changed after the ritual they had performed with their Lord’s help. Hair so brown it was almost black fell in soft waves around his face. They had grown it out and practiced braiding it, because hanging loose it would get in the way, but long hair was something common in South American wizards. “But I am already in character. The older brother worrying how they will be received by their father who knew nothing about them until they contacted him. Why shouldn’t I be pacing?”

“Hey, we are twins!” Rodolphus exclaimed indignantly. Taking the ageing potion in a greater dose so he would be as old as his brother had been a big step. He no longer was the baby brother. Even if Floppy had insisted to call them little masters when they had explained that from now on they were to be treated as strangers even if they still were part of the Lestrange family. He was as old as his brother now.

“But I still was born before you!” Rabastan joked, stopping to pace. “So I’ll be the older brother yet again.”

Snorting – it seemed his brother was determined that Rodolphus would stay the younger forever – Rodolphus started to put on the clothes they had selected for this day’s meeting. Consulting the Dark Lord and Snape – both shockingly aware of muggle society – they had opted for dress shirts and jackets worn over some trousers called jeans which were rather tight, long coats, and leather shoes.

“I think travelling the world in search of rare ingredients for potions and rituals is a good life. It’s much better than hiding.” Rodolphus was sure if he only repeated it enough times that he would learn to accept that this was going to be the way things were. As a kid he had dreamed of travelling the world, then he had craved to help their Lord rescue the traditions of their community. And now they could help by not disrupting their Lord’s plans. Maybe even help by finding things all over the world.
“I just hope the young girl isn’t so clever that she will see through our story the moment we stand before her.” Giving Rabastan the evil look they had used on each other when one had ruined a plan as long as they could walk, Rodolphus shook his head.

“We did a good job, there’s no way she can know about the rituals we used, and therefore she can’t know who we used to be. If we don’t tell her!”

ooOoo

Hermione was excited. She would get to meet wizards from overseas and would be able to talk to them for longer than a few moments. That was what she had wished for during the Quidditch world cup, and the Tri-Wizard-Tournament, to learn about different cultures. But both times what had happened around the events had dashed those wishes thoroughly.

Uncle Xerxes had picked them up so the trip to the restaurant wouldn’t take so long. At the moment they were already seated at their table ordering drinks to pass the time until Xerxes’ sons would be here.

“And please don’t ask them too many questions at once, Hermione,” Her mother admonished her, a merry twinkle in her eyes. Hermione mock-pouted, before she collapsed into giggles. “I’ll try, mum. But I’m just so curious!”

Hermione felt like running around in circles and jumping up and down. It had been quite a few years since she had done exactly that the morning they were to visit an exhibition about Egypt in London. Thinking back, Hermione always felt a little embarrassed for her younger self. But she had been looking forward to that visit for days.

“I’m sure she’ll be a perfectly polite young lady.” Xerxes said with a smile, nervously folding his hands on the table. Hermione was sure he had to be terribly nervous over meeting his sons after all those years. She wasn’t quite sure how she would feel in his shoes. But when she ever had children, she would know they existed. Men were a little disadvantaged in this.

“How are the preparations for the festival at your school progressing?” With practiced ease Hermione’s mother Jean moved the conversation into safer waters. “Everything is finished,” Xerxes answered with a thankful smile. They talked about the festival that would take place the following day until two men in their late forties, early fifties – Hermione never had been good at estimating the age of people – were led to their table by one of the staff.

While Hermione looked them over, everyone stood to greet the new arrivals. The two weren’t identical twins – like Fred and George – but fraternal twins. If she hadn’t been told that they were twins, she would have guessed they were brothers who were close in age. Both had dark – almost black – hair that was braided back from their faces. They had a dark complexion and brown eyes. Their clothes weren’t anything remarkable, but since they had been travelling the world, it was to be expected that they knew how to dress as to blend in with muggles.

“And this is my heiress, Hermione. She is currently home from school for the holidays.” Her uncle’s words yanked Hermione out of her recollection of the oddly dressed wizards and witches she had seen the summer before last.

“Nice to meet you,” she greeted politely, accepting the hands offered and shook them with a sure
It’s nice to meet you too.” There was a faint trace of an accent there that Hermione couldn’t identify.

They settled down again, and soon they had ordered their food. Under the watchful gaze of her parents, Hermione had no trouble restraining the barrage of questions fighting for attention in her own head. The fact that the two brothers, who had introduced themselves as Tiago and Teofilo, had so many entertaining stories to tell from their travels made it easy to just listen to them talk.

Soon dessert was brought out and the conversation had switched over to schooling. Xerxes had told some of the funny things that had happened at Hogwarts while he had been a student, Jean and Fabian had shared the story of how they had met during their studies to become dentists, and Hermione had been pressed into telling the story of her efforts to free the house-elves of Hogwarts. Now that she knew more about house-elves she felt a little stupid for charging in head-first before doing any research. But there had to be a reason she was a Gryffindor and not a Ravenclaw.

“We thought you all might like to visit some of the important and interesting sights of London, after we have finished our lunch. Jean organised a tour with several stops. The Tower of London is just one of them.” Her father was smiling, it was obvious that her parents liked the newly found additions to the family. They suddenly had much more of that. Going to get herself an ancestry test had been a good decision after all. Hermione really looked forward to being able to be an influence on politics once she had finished her schooling.

“That is a really nice offer, Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Tiago and I would be really happy to see the city.” The one with the slightly broader face, and a slightly curved tooth – Hermione wasn’t sure if it was from a crocodile or something else – as a charm around his neck, answered for them both.

“And I would like to treat you all to a piece of cake or some ice cream at Fortescue's in Diagon Alley at the end. What do you think?” Xerxes was in a really good mood, and Hermione was happy to see this. Ever since his other, younger sons had escaped the prison and then died in that horrible fire, she had worried that he might slip into a depression, but now it looked like this danger was less likely to happen.

Engaged in lively chatter, the group of six ventured out into London to have a good time.

oooOOooo

After they had brought Harry back home yesterday, Remus and Sirius had gone back to Grimmauld Place and gathered what information they could from the tapestry. The actual portraits were tiny enough to only hint at the appearance of a person, but it was enough to see the colour of their skin, hair and other such superficial facts. There were also the names, and the dates of birth. It should be enough for a good investigator to be able to find her and the twins, especially because they could tell that she had been in London somewhere in the months from January to March of 1981.

Remus and he had spent the whole morning with the search for someone who would be able to search for Olivienne in both the Muggle and magical world. Because for the life of him, Sirius couldn’t remember ever meeting her. But obviously he had. The tapestry showed the evidence plain enough.
They had found someone and contacted the young muggleborn wizard who had agreed to come to Grimmauld Place and talk with Sirius, to see if he would accept the job.

That was the reason why Sirius currently was pacing up and down the stairs in nervous anticipation. Now that he knew of his daughters, Sirius wanted to get to know them, meet them, be a part of their life. But he knew that it would take time to find the three of them. The world was big, and the part in which French names could be found wasn’t that much smaller… but there was always the possibility that she was living somewhere else with the twins. Sirius feared that his patience would run out long before they could be found. And even when they were found, there was still the possibility… turning to walk back, Sirius quickly changed the direction his train of thought was going in. He couldn’t think about that, not yet, it would only make him worry more.

Remus stepped out of the room where they had set up everything and shook his head at Sirius. “Sit down and take a calming draught, Sirius. He will think you want to murder the three, the way you’re acting now.”

Sirius threw his friend a glare, only to get a laugh back, before he went to do as Moony had instructed. Running himself ragged wouldn’t do any good anyway.

Not a minute later than agreed upon – but much later than Sirius would have liked – the young wizard was shown in by Kreacher. The first impression Sirius got was that he looked capable. His robes looked well kept, and professional, but obviously weren’t from one of those tailors Sirius had to get his robes from. Damn that ridiculous notion of fitting in. Sirius would love to see the faces of the whole Wizengamot if he came in in jeans and a leather jacket for the next session. But now he needed to focus.

“Welcome, Mr. Jacobs. Thank you for agreeing to come here on such short notice.” Sirius could be serious – no pun intended – when he needed to be. And currently seriousness was needed.

“It’s no problem, Lord Black.” The young man shrugged and gave a polite smile. “I currently don’t have any other jobs. It’s no problem to come here and see if I can help you. You said that you had someone you wanted me to find, Lord Black?”

“That’s correct. I recently discovered on the family tapestry, that I have daughters – twins – with a woman I met only once. She never contacted me after that one meeting, but at most we exchanged given names, so that’s no surprise.” It wasn’t easy to speak about this. Not even remembering Olivienne felt terrible. He loved his carefree life, no commitments, lots of fun. But not even remembering the woman who was the mother of his daughters? Somehow that wasn’t right.

“So you want me to find them? For what reason?” The question was offered neutrally enough. Contacting the young muggleborn investigator had been the right decision. One of the more conservative – and experienced – investigators might have judged him over the fact he had had kids with a woman he wasn’t married to.

Sirius nodded. “I want to make contact. I hope that I can be a part of the girls’ lives, if their mother allows it. And I’m also searching for an heir. But before I can ask if they, or one of them, wants to accept the position, or if they even want to have anything to do with me…” Sirius took a deep breath. “So, do you think you could find her?”

Mr. Jacobs gave a wry smile. “That depends on if you can give me more facts to go from than the fact that I’m looking for a woman who is the mother of twin girls.”

“Reasonable.” Sirius shuddered inside, he sounded like one of those boring old men he had always made fun of. “Her name is Olivienne Moreau. Born on the tenth of July 1951. She probably has
some African ancestors. Dark skin, dark hair with tight curls. She has to have been in London or one of the cities near London during January to March of 1981. We most likely met in one of those clubs,” Sirius handed over the parchment with names he and Remus had compiled the previous evening. “But I don’t remember meeting her. The twins were born on the eleventh of November 1981. They were named Nawel Lyra and Enora Libra. Remus – Mr. Lupin – claims they look like me. But I think the portraits on the tapestry are too small to judge. They seem to have lighter skin than their mother, hair a little bit straighter.” There wasn’t anything more they had found that was fact, so Sirius shrugged and asked. “Is that enough?”

The young man was looking over the list, then got out one of those travel quills and started to take notes. “Witch or Muggle?”

“I have no idea. I guess Muggle, because if she had been a witch she would have used a contraception charm?” Sirius assumed – more asking than stating – that he had been totally pissed when he had met Olivienne. That would explain why he couldn’t remember meeting her, and why he had either messed up the charm, or forgotten to cast it in the first place.

“I guess it should be enough, but it will take time. It all happened many years ago. Many documents might already be lost. Most witnesses have forgotten what they knew. But with three names, dates of birth for all of them, and a starting point where one of them was during a not-too-long period of time.” He nodded, pursed his lips in thought, and looked Sirius directly in the eye. “I will work for you if you’re willing to pay me three Sickles a day, and expenses, of course.” The smile was disarming, but even with the amounts of money Sirius had in his vaults he wasn’t going to pay that much without trying to get the price down.

“2 Sickles per day, all expenses covered,” was his counter offer.

“Accepted.” The young man grinned, probably seeing himself travelling all over Europe, all costs covered by Sirius.

“I would like frequent updates.” They started to hash out some more details and then wrote down everything in a proper contract.

When Sirius watched the young man go – more than an hour later – he felt better, hopeful. There was a good chance he would get to meet his daughters pretty soon.

Harry stood in the floo room at Griffin House, his cloak draped over his arm, watching in amusement as Nagini argued with Marvolo.

.":You were away all day yesterday! I want to come along!:. Her head was raised quite a bit from the floor, and the golden-yellow coloured rug her large body was coiled on contrasted nicely with the dark green of the snake’s scales.

Marvolo gave an exasperated eye roll before he started his hissed explanation yet again .:"That’s all good and well, Nagini. But it’s cold outside, and you and I both know that you’ll start complaining about being cold after just a few moments away from the warmth of the fire. And I guess you’ll be bored soon as well:".
For a few moments Nagini swayed back and forth, probably contemplating if staying near the fire was worth more than being with her wizard, and the young one. \textbf{I know you can wave your stick and make it so that I stay warm.} She sounded smug, clearly of the opinion that she had found the solution to all the problems Marvolo had listed.

\textbf{You would have to stay with me the whole time, no slithering off at all.} That hissing could sound that stern always made Harry puzzle how it was that Parseltongue worked. Snakes didn’t really make any sounds, and the hisses humans speaking Parseltongue made always sounded the same, or so Ron and Hermione had claimed. Was it context that made it possible to discern between emotions?

\textbf{If you carry me, I will stay warm without you waving your stick around.} now the snake sounded even more pleased. Harry snickered, it was fun seeing her outmanoeuvering Marvolo for a change. Normally it was Harry who got pressed into doing something for the snake, like retrieving some of the rats for breakfast just this morning.

Marvolo’s red eyes gave Harry a you-think-that’s-funny look before he turned back to the snake, who was curled into a smug heap of green scales. \textbf{If you can’t behave I will send you back here with a portkey. So come over here, we need to leave.}

Harry swung the cloak around himself, and tucked the mittens into one of the pockets. It was time to go and meet Theo so they could visit a weaving mill that belonged to Harry. It still felt really strange to know that he owned businesses, houses, flats, acres of land. Why and how had his family managed to get all that wealth?

Marvolo stood as Nagini slithered up his body to wrap herself around the tall wizard, while the older cast a glamour on his eyes to turn them to the blue he wore in public, and waved Harry to go on through the floo.

Harry grabbed a pinch of floo-powder out of the container on the mantle – made out of some almost translucent, milky stone – before he threw it into the flames and stepped in, calling out his destination. “Nott Home.”

ooOoo

Theo had waited by the Floo, his father back in his office helping Aiden with his reading, for Harry and the Dark Lord to pick him up. He still felt a deep sense of pride over the fact that he had managed to get as close to Harry as he had since the summer. When Harry could bring one friend on an outing, Theo had been the one chosen. Maybe Harry would have asked Hermione if the witch didn’t have a prior engagement, or that Weasley from their year if it weren’t obvious to anyone who had ever meet the boy that he would be bored within minutes. Being the first Slytherin, one of those Harry had gotten closer to just this autumn, to be considered was pretty good.

And putting aside all that political posturing, Theo simply was happy that he would get to go on an outing with his friend.

With a flare of green light and the typical sound Harry stepped out of the Floo first, followed by the Dark Lord carrying a really big, green snake around his shoulders.
“Hello, my Lord, Henry.” Theo bowed in greeting. The two were already wearing their warm clothes, so Theo quickly slipped into his own coat, wound the scarf around his neck, and put on the mittens.

“You’re ready to leave?” asked the Dark Lord after hissing to his snake, offering each teenager an arm. Harry took hold of the one nearer to him and Theo, assuming that they would continue their travel via apparition, took the other arm.

“I am, sir,” Theo answered.

“When does your father expect you back?” the Dark Lord wanted to know.

Theo looked up to the wizard his father had sworn his life to and answered, “Father and Aiden expect me to be back for dinner. I have promised to help Aiden to rehearse for the play tomorrow.”

“Very well. I’ll make sure that you will be back by then.” With a spin they vanished into the crushing darkness that always accompanied apparation. Theo’s father always claimed that apparating on your own power wasn’t as bad, but Theo doubted that.

ooOoo

With a still unusual feeling of contentedness Marvolo watched the way Henry and his friend Theodore looked on as an elderly Squib operated a loom, creating inch after inch of cloth before their very eyes.

“How does it work?” Henry sounded truly curious, stepping closer to the non-magical loom with its moving parts, the noise it was making in regular intervals. “What type of cloth are you making?”

“This is wool yarn. It will be a patterned twill. A diamond pattern. The warp is dark, the weft a slightly lighter blue. It’s a durable fabric, great for high quality working robes.” With practiced movements she beat the weft into place, changed the shafts and set the shuttle into motion. “The shafts,” she pointed to a part of the loom and Marvolo grinned because both boys already looked lost, “control the pattern. The shuttle holds the weft and moves from right to left and back again through the shed. After a while it all is rather easy. I remember when I started here – that was when Lord Charlus Potter was still in charge – I felt like I had been thrown into a parallel world.” She laughed, her hands and the loom never ceasing to move. The room was filled with the sound of wood moving on wood, with clacks and creaks, the air was dry, filled with the scent of herbs to keep moths and other critters away from the wool.

“For a while there it wasn’t as nice working here. The cloth created here without even a spark of magic is better for use with charms and such. The tailors love our fabric, gladly pay more for it. But after the young James died, we got a new manager… well all is well now again.”

She stopped speaking and continued to work, so the three of them moved on to the next big loom. And they walked past a few more. One was currently in the process of being warped, thread for thread drawn through those openings, bound to some horizontal beam. Marvolo felt like he was watching an intricate ritual being prepared by a practiced witch. But this woman was a Squib, like all the others who were working on the looms here.

Henry had a frown on his face. “What was she hinting at? Was there a problem here?” He was speaking too low to be heard by anyone but Marvolo and Theodore who both were walking right
next to him over the din of noise created by all those looms.

“There was indeed trouble with the manager, until I fired him. A wizard of at best mediocre abilities. His father was manager before him. The man made sure his son would get a job here and manipulated everything so his son would take the position as manager once he retired,” Marvolo started to explain, keeping his gaze on a loom creating several patterned ribbons at once, kept working by power taken from a mill – which was powered by the river flowing next to the building – and distributed via mechanics Marvolo didn’t properly understand, which was monitored by a watchful young man.

“He used the advantage his wand gave him over the workers to take *liberties*, shorten the wages to keep more for himself... a lot of the women are happy he is gone now.” The expression flashing shortly on Henry’s face made it quite clear that he had understood what liberties the sorry excuse for a wizard had taken. “No one was willing to come forward and speak to the Aurors, not that I blame them, so I simply made sure he will have trouble finding work again.” And Marvolo had made sure the man never again would find pleasure in non-consensual activities of that kind.

They walked by a few looms producing simple plain weave linen fabric when Theodore asked a question. “Why is cloth created without magic any better? I mean, why go to such length as to put up signs like this one.” He pointed to one of the big signs painted in red on white which all read *No Magic* which were placed everywhere around the looms.

Marvolo smiled, he had been surprised as well the day he had inspected everything he now had to manage until Henry became of age. “Charms typically placed on clothes, such as self-cleaning, water fastness and so on, deteriorate over time. It seems that fabric produced without magic have fewer remnants of magic which interfere with anything cast on robes produced out of it. Potter fabric holds onto charms longer as a result. And the traditional tailors never would get away with buying in the Muggle world. I think the requirements in material and pattern wouldn’t be easily met in the Muggle world anyway.”

That was one of the reasons that high quality objects were as expensive as they were. You just couldn’t use magic to create the foundation for magic to be applied to it. That was, if one wanted the charms to last.

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Harry listened attentively as Marvolo explained why the fabric created in this mill was so sought after that they could charge almost any price they wanted. And he was pleased to realize that this explanation about remnants of magic from the creation interfering with charms cast later matched perfectly with what Professor Babbling had said about the material they should select for projects with runes. The less contact something had with magic prior to being worked on, the less possibility there was that something would go wrong because of interaction between different spells and magical effects. She had made them all write essays about why it was important to know everything about an object to be imbued with runes before starting.

He still was angry that there had been a man in charge of one of his businesses and had abused that position of power. But did he want to know what Marvolo might have done to the man? Harry wasn’t sure, so he decided to wait and maybe ask later. But there had been another question waiting for some time now.
“Do you know how it happened that the Potters, Malfoys, and other families have so much, and families like the Weasleys don’t? I would have thought that history class should explain that but I guess Professor Binns never will talk about something like that.” In fact Harry wondered if the ghost ever would tell something that was actually interesting. Most of the time he spoke about conflicts and the treaties that had been written in their aftermath.

“Let’s take this to the balcony.” Marvolo decided, pointing at a small balcony attached to the manager’s office from where the hall with all the looms was easily to survey.

So they moved to up there and sat down on a few rickety chairs placed around a small table. The young secretary who had greeted them on their arrival brought them tea, and they settled down, still watching the looms in operation. Harry remembered weaving some easy samples in primary school, but they had used thin sticks to move the strings up and down while weaving the piece of string attached to the stick in between those already on the simple loom. What he was seeing here was so much more complicated.

“Simply put, it all comes down to who was where and did what. Those that were in the right place at the right moment are now those families that hold seats on the Wizengamot and have money. But I guess you want a more in-depth explanation?” Marvolo was sipping at his tea, making a face of distaste, before he added three more spoons of sugar to the cup.

Harry just gave him an unimpressed look. Of course he wanted a more thorough explanation.

“When people started to settle down – moving from hunter-gatherer to agriculture – those that were able to provide shelter were elevated above the others. From time to time, those that provided shelter from bad weather, natural disaster, other humans, became chieftains, lords, kings. Groups came together under one leader. Individuals gained a reputation for themselves, gained the trust of others, were named leaders, or declared themselves as such. In time, kings and queens emerged and gathered courts around.” Marvolo made a pause to see if he had all of their attention, which he did, before he took another sip from his tea, and then started to speak again.

“Among those being called to the courts, and among those gaining a group of dependants, were magicals as well as muggles. Merlin, Morgana, the four Founders, to name a few. All of them had magic and enough skill to use their talent to shield and use those weaker than them. Kings had the right to assign land, and the people living on the land, to people they chose. And most often they chose someone they wanted to reward, someone they could rely on.” Marvolo took another sip from his tea, and Harry grabbed one of the small tartlets that had been brought out with the tea.

“With the land came income, as well as responsibilities. Some were more apt in managing their money, making their fortune grow. When the Wizengamot was first called together, called by a muggle king to help in a war, the most talented wizards and witches, those with the most land and influence, were called together. War and invasion – like the one from what is now France which brought the Malfoys to our island – upset the established order, creating opportunities for others to rise. Those families that are called most ancient and noble are those that have managed to stay in their position the longest. Those that are simply called House of joined relatively recently.”

Theo nibbled on a tartlet and looked a little nervous, maybe. Harry was intrigued. He would really like to know who had been the lucky one in the past of his family to bring about the start of the wealth and importance of the Potters.

“Do you think there’s a family which actually knows for sure what happened to bring them to where they are now?” Harry asked of no one in particular, idly stirring his rapidly cooling tea.

“We know pretty much, if not all,” Theo mumbled, blushing. Maybe he was embarrassed because
the Notts hadn’t been in the Wizengamot all that long. Comparatively speaking.

“I know a lot from the beginning,” Marvolo started, looking contemplative. “Salazar wasn’t the one where everything started for the Slytherin family. But he certainly is the one most remember. The name vanished in the male line, and the last Gaunts fell for the myth of pure blood. First losing their magical talents, then their money and influence.”

Then he looked over to Harry. “You’ll have the honour of learning all that I know during the summer. And I guess you’ll learn what your grandfather can teach you about the history of the Potters.”

They took a tour of the storage of finished fabric and then dropped Theo at home before they and Nagini, who had been silent most of the day, returned to their own home for dinner.

oooOOooo

During the whole day – as he now finally was able to think clearly again, recovered from the ritual – Marvolo had been pondering two problems. One was if he needed another death to anchor the floating soul to the new container, and if it needed to be an unrepentant murder as was required for the creation of a horcrux in the first place. And second, if the returned piece of his soul would cause some more changes to him.

The first was something that needed a few more days to ponder, and probably would have to wait until after all the festivities were over and done with. But the second could be tested rather easily. At least compared to the speculations on how to adapt the ritual to move horcruxes between containers.

One possible change to his mind he had just finished testing, and was now packing away the materials gathered by Malcolm back into the charmed drawer in his bedroom. It looked like his current belief that he might simply be asexual and not unable to feel attraction to another human being because of his mutilated soul was still the most likely.

In a way, Marvolo wasn’t even all that upset about the possibility. After all, he had always thought of such affairs as a weakness, but he was unhappy with not being sure.

He had always thought to know his own self pretty well, his motivations, his shortcomings, his own faults. He never would have admitted to any faults in the past, but he had always known of his own fears, his own weaknesses, because you needed to know to be able to shield them. Not knowing if he simply wasn’t interested in sex, or if the continued effort to repair his own soul would change that, was frustrating.

And all those matchmaking mothers and older witches haunting him because it was just expected of a Lord to marry, wouldn’t simply go away.

With a sigh, Marvolo cast the locking charm over the drawer. It would just be too complicated if Henry ever found this and started to ask questions. Marvolo was pretty sure he would prefer to not have to speak about the reason he had such… material… in his room.

With another sigh, Marvolo banished those unproductive thoughts to the back of his mind and walked over to his bathroom for a nice long soak in hot water with a potion in it Severus had invented sometime ago to counter the effects of the cruciatus curse. The small phial had been on
his night-stand when he came into his room after dinner, and Flimm had informed him – after
being asked – that Malcolm had brought it over earlier in the day and that he had to take a bath
with it, healer’s orders.

Contemplating how bad he had been to his own followers that Severus had come up with a potion
to counter the regular exposure to the torture curse, he started to fill the tub and stripped out of his
clothes. It had been a long day.

ooooO0000

Rosamund was walking down the hall, floating a stack of bed linen beside her. It was late, all
patients asleep in their beds, and she looking forward to the end of her shift. It had been a long day
with difficult families visiting their loved ones, and a few of those rare fans of Gilderoy making a
ruckus at the doors. She would really enjoy a glass of red wine while taking a long hot bath once
she was home.

Sweeping the hall with her gaze, the lights dimmed due to the late hour, she thought she saw
someone moving out of one of the rooms. Setting down the stack of linens on a lone chair standing
next to a potted plant, she carefully but swiftly made her way over to where she had seen the
movement.

When she spotted the man trying to sneak about in his nightshirt, she was surprised and a gentle
smile automatically spread over her face. All of them developed such a handling-the-patients smile,
it was more effective in keeping them calm than many other tools.

“Mr. Dumbledore, why are you out of bed?” She smiled, moving one hand to her wand, the other
towards the old man, who looked a little like a child who had been caught trying to steal some
sweets from the kitchen cupboard. ‘Come, let’s get you back into your room. You have to be tired
after the long day you had.” There was a moment where Rosamund feared he would try to dodge
around her, or run, but then he deflated and went willingly.

Half an hour later she looked in on Mr. Dumbledore a last time before going to change out of her
work robes to find him sleeping peacefully. She would have to report his nightly wandering to the
Healers. They had asked that they all keep a close eye on Mr. Dumbledore. But that could wait
until tomorrow.

Whistling a jaunty tune, Rosamund walked away from her shift, waving to the medi-wizard taking
over and went to go home. It had been a long day indeed.

Chapter End Notes

I thought a while about how much Mr. Jacobs should charge. I decided to assume that
the wizarding coins are worth more than usually stated. It makes more sense to me
that way. If seven Galleons for a wand is too much for the Weasleys to pay easily, it
makes no sense that that much money can be earned with a day’s worth of work by a
normal wizard or witch. I’m sure there are many different views on that, but this is
what I chose for this story.
Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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**Chapter Notes**

I wish you fun reading! (There was trouble with FFN not sending out notification mails for the last chapter. No idea if everything worked alright here, so you might want to check if you already read Chapter 68)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Saturday, 23rd of December**

Currently Sonja and Severus were out in what was to become the potions garden, laying down a plan of what to plant where. It was always important to take the soil into consideration, as well as water availability, shade and sun, and what other plants were growing nearby. Therefore they were out here to see the place with their own eyes and check the conditions with all their senses.

Severus had a sturdy piece of paper clipped to a board, as well as a pencil to make sketches and take notes with. Both were more convenient in this scenario than the usual parchment, quill, and ink.

They had left the castle this morning right after breakfast. Sitting at the same table as the students, because so few had stayed this year, wasn't what Severus would call a nice breakfast situation. He had been glad to leave early.

"Do you think it's going to work out for us to stay the whole day?" Sonja suddenly asked, adjusting her scarf and hat.

"Aurora agreed to watch my snakes for me today. And there are a female and a male prefect among those that have opted to stay behind. If there should be any trouble, they know who to ask for help. I'm sure they all will still be there when we return this evening." And how Severus wished he could hand the responsibilities of Head of House to someone else for at least the duration of these holidays. He dearly wished to spent as much time as possible with his lovely wife in the manor, renovating.

"So I guess we won't get to stay here tomorrow?" Sonja said with a grin, using her hoe to break the slightly frozen ground of the spot they were currently checking.

"Minerva certainly will insist that we attend all meals. But there is still more to the holidays than Christmas. So we will get more opportunities to work on the Manor." Severus grinned over to his wife. She grinned back. "We'll be expected at the Malfoys' tomorrow, so we'll be able to escape the castle for at least part of the day." They had a lot of fun renovating. Much more than Severus would ever have guessed.

He let his eyes wander over the horizon, or what he could see between the small outbuildings and trees surrounding the Manor. Everything was covered in a thin layer of ice crystals – glittering even in the overcast light they had – the air cold and crisp. It was a really nice winter day to be outside securely wrapped up in warm clothing.

Just moments before he was about to bend over his board again – to write down Sonja's assessment
of the soil at the spot she currently was examining – when he spotted the form of an owl heading in their direction.

The notes forgotten, Severus fixed his eyes on the approaching messenger. It only took a moment for Sonja to pick up on the change in Severus' posture, looking around to search for the cause. Soon they were both following the owl's flight to the half toppled remain of a fence where it rested, clearly waiting to be relieved of its burden, a scroll of parchment.

Dropping the board and pencil to the ground, Severus got out his wand and started casting detection charms at the owl and the missive on his way over. All came back without any indication that there might be a trap laid for him. So it probably was safe to get the scroll from the owl.

The moment the scroll was no longer attached to its leg the owl took off without waiting. Checking the seal, Severus quickly realised who had sent the letter before he broke the seal and unfurled the scroll.

Master Snape,

I write to you in the hope that your schedule will permit the addition of another project. The fact that the goblins have imposed a restriction on the number of ancestry tests hinders the efforts of Lord Lestrange in finding families for those young witches and wizards he is rescuing from the inadequate system of foster care the Muggles have established.

I'm not asking for you to recreate the potion the goblins are using. But I am asking for you to find something to check for familial bonds beyond those between siblings, or parents and child. Something to indicate the existence of common ancestors, not reveal all the names of them. Such a potion shouldn't violate the treaty.

I will, of course, compensate you for your work and the materials should you choose to accept my proposal. Please inform me of your decision.

Sincerely,

Lord Marvolo Slytherin

Several thoughts immediately started running through Severus' mind. There were several perks to being an expert Occlumence. First there was the fact that his Lord had asked him to develop this potion – not ordered – that was something that never had happened before. Then there was the idea of the potion itself. It was intriguing to ponder how he might achieve the goal that had been set.

"Who is the letter from?" Sonja wanted to know, gliding over the ground over to him. Her curiosity shone in her eyes.

"Lord Slytherin." Severus smiled at her questioning glance. "He asked if I might develop a potion for him." Holding out the scroll for her in invitation, he smirked. He loved the challenge that the development of a new potion offered.

Sonja snatched the scroll out of his hand, unfurling it, to read as quickly as she could. The smile that spread over her face was evidence of how much she liked inventing too. "I think there are some books in the library that could help us with that." She waved the scroll in a playful manner. "Do you want to finish here first, or go back and start right this moment?"

They shared a smirk. Severus summoned their supplies, and they walked back to the manor holding hands, the library their destination. They would spend a delightful day researching and gathering information to develop their vague ideas into a first attempt they would be able to brew and test.
Bundled up warmly to ward off the cold, Fabian followed his daughter and wife through the festively decorated London. They had had breakfast this morning and then had made their way into the city to make the last purchases they needed. They had started early so they would have the afternoon and the evening free to visit the school festival his uncle had invited them to. They needed groceries for the meal tomorrow, some last-minute presents for some neighbours, and candles, as well as a few other odds and ends.

"I'm so happy that Uncle Xerxes is getting to know his older sons! I'm sure it'll help him cope with the loss of the younger sons." Hermione obviously struggled over how to talk about the two wizards who had escaped from the prison and then later supposedly died in a fire caused by one of the other escapees.

Fabian smiled another sad smile, unnoticed by the two women walking before him, chattering happily. It had been an interesting meal, conversing with the two wizards who claimed to have been born in South America, listening to their stories, to stories told by Hermione and Xerxes. It always was like getting to peek through a small window into a world so different from, but at the same time eerily similar to, his own.

The timing of the two wizards' appearance was a little suspicious, though. At least in Fabian's eyes. Two sons escaped from prison, and were caught in a fire so that their bodies weren't able to be identified by sight. Hermione had written to them that the newspaper had said that the Aurors had informed them that the remains had been clearly identified. But with the knowledge that magic was able to give someone the appearance of someone else with a potion, it wasn't all that reassuring to hear such claims.

Magic was capable of so much, so why couldn't it be used in faking one's own death?

And shortly after that convenient death – ending the search for the escapees – another two sons, twins, older this time, popped up out of nowhere.

Fabian had read enough murder mysteries to smell a plot twist when he saw it.

Yesterday evening he had asked Hermione to see her ancestry test. He had claimed that he wanted to study it further. Sadly, it only showed Hermione's direct ancestors. Not even Xerxes was on it, only his parents, as they also were Dorcas', Fabian's mother's, parents. No siblings or their descendants, only ever the parents of the one in the generation after that. If it had been different it might have shown if the claim that Xerxes had had a total of four sons was true, or not. So it had proven to be useless in this.

But did it really matter in the end? He had no proof for his suspicion. And he had to assume that those Aurors knew what they were doing. They were the police in the magical world, after all. They should be aware of what magic could achieve. Shouldn't they? And therefore surely they would have tested to make sure no one had used magic to fake their death. Just to pop up as totally different people a few weeks later.

The fact was that his little girl still had enough faith in authority not to fall into the trap of endless worrying and fruitless thoughts going in circles. For all that Fabian knew, the story they had been told was the truth. The two men they had met yesterday certainly had looked older and not at all like the pictures that had been published – even in the news shows on the television – to warn everyone about the dangerous criminals on the loose.

Deciding that it would change nothing, and would only worry everyone, Fabian quickened his
stride to walk between his two girls. "Do you want to pick up one of the illustrated books of the most beautiful places all around Britain for the newly discovered members of our family?" Jean and Hermione both laughed, and their daughter happily dragged them over to one of the nearest bookstores to search for a nice present.

They certainly would not leave the store without at least one overburdened bag of books. It never ended any other way when Hermione managed to get them all to go into a bookstore together. They all loved reading too much to let it come out any other way.

Smiling, with his doubts about Tiago and Teofilo all but forgotten, Fabian allowed himself to be dragged into the store overflowing with late shoppers just like them.

oooOo00

The grounds of Dorcas' School for Youngsters – the name had come from somewhere and stuck despite all efforts from Xerxes to use the other name – was filled with people. There was a strange mix of attire to be seen. Wizards and witches in robes and billowing cloaks, people in the latest muggle fashion, suits and dresses. Pointed hats and knitted caps. Colours ranging from the sombre to the cheerful. Music was playing in the background. Everything was lighted by fire, floating candles, and torches. The scent of cinnamon and other spices, hot apples, and baked goods filled the air. Xerxes walked around, speaking with everyone who wanted a word, happy that his plan had worked so well. If Severus Snape managed to make the potion their Lord had said he would request, it would get even better. Getting all those lost children into families to be loved and cherished was what he truly wanted.

Soon he moved over to the assembly hall with its stage, where the play all the children had worked so hard on would take place. He had never before looked forward to an amateur theatre production with quite as much anticipation as he did now.

While he searched for his place he saw Lucius and his wife standing with the Greengrasses a little farther back, talking animatedly. This informal gathering seemed to be well received by everyone. With a smile Xerxes sat down. Narcissa had selected her robes in a style that put emphasis on the fact that her pregnancy was showing. It was wonderful to know that the number of children was going to increase in the next years.

With a wave to Benjamin and his son, Xerxes sat down to wait for the play to begin.

oo00oo

Theo sat next to his father in the first row watching the play unfold on the stage. The audience sat in darkness, the stage was brightly illuminated.

The play wasn't all that engaging. Lots of small parts of different animals played by the children. Aiden was a fox, and there were a squirrel, a bear, several different birds – including an owl and a magpie – a mouse, a wolf, and several others.

They all looked quite cute in their costumes, complete with makeup. It had been difficult imagining what they would look like only from what Aiden had prattled on and on about the whole time since Theo had come back from school. It was nice having a little brother, and the novelty hadn't worn off yet. And so Theo couldn't really stop grinning.

The seasons changed on the stage by the change of the light from a sunny yellow to a reddish-brown changing the tint on the trees made of cardboard so they changed from summer to autumn trees.
When the trees changed to those of winter – their branches suddenly bare – Theo knew that some magic was in play here. First the leaves did fall down to the wooden floor and then snow started to fall from the ceiling.

The applause after the winter had changed into spring again and the play was over was thunderous. One after the other the audience stood and clapped. Theo felt himself grinning from ear to ear. Aiden had had so much fun preparing for this, it had been a delight to help him rehearse.

"Did you see me?" said boy, still in his fox costume, came running down to Theo, skipping with each step and shouting his question. Then the boy crashed into his older brother, enveloping Theo in a hug.

"Yes, I saw you, Aiden. You were really good!" It was easy to close his arms around his adopted brother, returning the hug. "What do you think? Do you want to get something to eat? I'm hungry!"

For a short moment Aiden stayed in the hug, his head tilted back so he could look up to his much taller brother. And then he suddenly was walking towards the exit, Theo's hand firmly grabbed in his own. Laughing, Theo followed Aiden out into the cold, and over to one of the tables offering food and drink.

ooOoo

"What do you think?" Jean turned around, away from the small stall showcasing a multitude of different ornaments, to look back at her husband, who was standing behind her, grinning at her enthusiasm. "Should we buy one of these for our tree back home?"

There were so many pretty things the children had made. No angels or simple baubles like they could have bought in every other store, but small depictions of robins, snowflakes, different plants, ice crystals. They were simply beautiful.

"As long as it's not something obviously magical, I don't see why not. Maybe that robin over there?" He pointed to a small bird made from clay and painted in bright colours.

Jean gave a small snow globe with eternally falling snow a sorrowful look, but then turned to the different robins. Fabian was right, if they bought something that was obviously magical they couldn't risk it being seen by their neighbours, friends, or co-workers. And that meant they couldn't hang it on the tree.

Sometimes it was hard not being able to tell anyone that their daughter was a witch, and attended a respectable school for magic. Some of their acquaintances tended to mock them – not nearly subtly enough – about the fact that Hermione didn't attend one of the prestigious boarding schools their children had been sent to.

But it was what it was. They knew that their daughter was one of the best students at her school. Was going to be part of her world's leadership. The fact that she took that responsibility as seriously as she did almost everything was something Jean was proud of and a little bit sad over. Her girl tended to be too mature, too much like an adult. She should be a teenager, obsessing over romances, schoolwork, and gossip. Not about the rights of house-elves or Hippogriffs.

In the end they decided to buy a robin and a small bunny, before they wandered to the next small stall offering different kinds of cookies. They were content in the knowledge that Hermione was somewhere here having fun with her friends from school which made it easy for them to luxuriate in the opportunity to delve into the magical world.
Harry stood together with Hermione, Draco, Theo, and the Greengrass sisters near one of the fires, each of them holding a bowl with warm stew – potatoes, carrots, and pork were the dominant ingredients – and a slice of bread, and talked with them. It had only been a few days ago that they had been in school together and then on the train, but they already had so much to talk about again.

Hermione alone had lots to talk about with the meeting of Xerxes and his previously unknown sons only a day in the past. It sounded as if they had had a fun time in London, visiting the Tower, Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, and Diagon Alley. They even had braved the Knight Bus, which Hermione had talked about with incredulity bright in her eyes. That thing was a safety hazard in her eyes.

Harry couldn't disagree. The way passengers were sliding about with their seats was prone to cause accidents.

Draco had earlier complained about the way his mother's swinging, unstable moods were keeping the house in a tense state. He had come across a sobbing elf near his parents' rooms on the day they had gotten back from school. The blond had assured them all that he was looking forward to becoming a big brother, but until then he was happy to stay at the school, far away from all the drama.

Daphne had just started to talk – using a moment when Hermione had her mouth full of stew – asking questions about their holiday homework when another person stepped into their small circle.

"Henry, I want to talk with you a moment," Marvolo said the moment the light from the fire fell on him, causing all the teenagers to fall silent instantly.

Harry felt like rolling his eyes. There was no reason to fear that Marvolo would do anything to them where so many people were watching. And Harry felt it was unlikely that Marvolo would torture a Death Eater relative of theirs just because they had dared speak in his presence.

Harry nodded and made to step away from his friends, but Marvolo quickly waved at him to stay where he was. "I plan to return home in another hour. Do you want to stay longer? You certainly can stay till the end of the festival if you wish, but I still have a lot of paperwork to tackle." The question had been posed rather matter-of-factly, making Harry feel like they both had learned their roles rather well since the summer.

"I would like to stay a little longer, sir. Shall I take the floo home?" Being allowed to stay behind with his friends felt really good. Marvolo didn't try to control him as the Dursleys had done, or to treat him as a small kid like too many of the Professors had always done. But with the full moon so far off, the wards around the school set by Marvolo himself, and so many adult wizards around, there really wasn't much of a danger to be expected here.

"You may use your portkey," Marvolo made a vague waving motion towards where the chain with the twin crests rested under Harry's shirt, scarf, and cloak, "the Floo, or ask Xerxes, or even Benjamin to apparate you back home."

Their discussion was interrupted when a small boy – not much older than five Harry guessed – came running towards them, and gripped Marvolo's warm robes with both tiny hands. ":Slithering Darkness: needs help! Please! Come help!" The boy looked cute in his mouse costume and makeup – his short hair still was charmed a grey befitting a mouse – but he quite obviously was near a panic, keeping tugging on Marvolo's robes.
The moment Harry registered that Marvolo had paled, looking down at the boy, he started to wonder if he really had heard a piece of parseltongue in there.

"Who needs help? And where?" Marvolo sounded calm enough, but Harry was sure there was a slight tremor in the man's voice.

"In the biolog… boil… the classroom with all the pictures of plants and animals. :Slithering Darkness: she's stuck under a rock, somehow it toppled from its place and fell on her. I can't get the lid off! Come help!" The tugging was getting more desperate, and now Harry was sure the small kid just had hissed what probably was the name of a snake.

Then Marvolo suddenly looked totally calm. "Show the way." The boy didn't wait around but started to run away from them, Marvolo on his heels in a much faster pace than Harry had ever seen.

"I think I'd better follow," was all Harry said to his friends before he too hurried off. Marvolo was lots better at handling Harry since they had become somewhat of a family, but he doubted that the man who still was a Dark Lord would do so well with a small boy who, if he truly was a Parselmouth, belonged to the family.

Not really acknowledging that possibility yet, Harry dodged a few couples and their children on his way to the biology classroom. It was a good thing that he had kept up with his training. Flying had helped with it, as had the Defence club. Otherwise he certainly wouldn't have managed to run through the crowd without knocking anyone to the ground.

When he reached the classroom, the light was on and Marvolo was bent over something on one of the tables, while the boy dressed up as a mouse was nervously looking on.

A few quick steps brought Harry to the young boy's side, where he crouched down so he wasn't towering over him so much. Suddenly he felt really tall. "Hey. He's really good with magic. The snake will be fine." The moment Harry had said that, he realized that he actually couldn't be sure that the snake would be fine. He didn't know how badly it had been injured. But if it had been too late already, Marvolo surely would have stopped by now. Patting the shoulder of the child by his side, Harry offered what comfort he could, only to find himself with an armful of frightened child a moment later.

oooOOooo

Marvolo tried to concentrate on healing the snake who seemingly was called Slithering Darkness. He certainly had heard that the child had spoken the name of the snake in Parseltongue, and the greeting between the snake – who had several broken ribs as well as injuries to a few inner organs – and the child indicated that they were friends of sorts.

In the back of his mind with a lot of other painful memories he tried to avoid most of the time, was the recollection of the first snake he had ever met. It had been just before he had been sent to school, to learn reading, writing, and all that. He had loved having a friend so unique, something special. After one of the older kids had killed it with a stone, because the girls had shrieked about the dangerous snake, and Marvolo had been helpless, he had never again become so attached to one of the snakes that found him.

Not until he had learned of magic, had learned how to defend himself, sometimes proactively, but the connection he had felt with that very first snake he had only reached again once he had found Nagini.
But now he needed to concentrate on the healing spells he was casting. He had brought the snake here, promised that there would be prey and warmth, essentially taking the snake under his protection. She had been hurt in the place he had left her. It was his responsibility to help her. Maybe he should place a few spells on the terrarium and its contents to make sure something like this couldn't happen again.

A few spells later he sat back, noticing Henry embracing the small boy who had brought them here in an attempt to soothe him. Ignoring that situation and all its implications – any Parselmouth was part of the family, but how could he care for a child as young as the boy? – Marvolo turned to Slithering Darkness. ..How are you feeling, my scaly friend?..

..The pain is gone, grown Speaker. Why haven't you visited? One of your hatchlings is here. I like his company. But I would have liked to see you too:. The snake slowly coiled into a small heap, as if she was testing her body, not once looking at either human in the room.

..I didn't know… that you wanted to see me. I will do better in the future:. Marvolo didn't feel so well. His hands were cold. He felt as if he were going to be sick. He had almost said that he didn't know that he had a hatchling here. But it couldn't be, could it? There was no way that he could take care of such a young child.

Marvolo turned to where Henry still was almost kneeling on the ground, his arms slung around the boy – he didn't even know the young one's name! – both looking at the snake which was slithering over the table, seemingly satisfied with the state of her body.

..Henry, take him to one of his teachers. He should get out of the costume and get something to eat. I will search for Xerxes, let him know that the home of Slithering Darkness needs better protection:. Before his son could answer, Marvolo turned on his heel and left the room. He needed to get out of there or he would break down.

ooOoo

For a moment Harry was stunned. Why had Marvolo left so fast? Without even placing the snake back in her habitat. But then the boy in his arms turned and Harry realized that he had other priorities right now.

"Let's get her back into her home, and then we will search for your teacher," Harry stated, not sure if he should ask if he was okay with that or if he shouldn't ask. Irate with himself for having to call the boy, boy in his head, Harry decided to do something about that right away. "By the way, I'm Harry. What's your name?"

"Hello, Harry! I'm Marcus. Can we get ..Slithering Darkness:. some new water?" The boy… Marcus looked shy, but much calmer now that the snake was healed.

"Sure we can." Harry stood and walked over to the table, where the snake was curiously peering over the edge. ..May I pick you up? You will get cold pretty fast if you stay out here:..

..I think Harry will be really careful. I'm sure:. And there was the last doubt about if Marcus was a part of the Slytherin family or not, gone. They would be able to give Marcus a real family.

Harry smiled.

..I'm always careful when carrying such a fine lady. And I think we will move the stone so it can't crush you again. If that's fine with you?:. The hiss Harry got in answer was not really a
word, but an agreeing noise.

Harry picked the snake up with deft fingers and placed her in the terrarium, before he added the stone directly on the ground. Then he placed the lid back on the terrarium and turned to Marcus who was watching attentively. "Let's get you out of your costume." Harry held a hand out to Marcus, who with a last hissing goodbye to the adder walked over to the teenager and took the offered hand.

Together they left the classroom and went out to where all the others were having fun.

ooOoo

Xerxes watched as Marvolo paced up and down in the classroom they had retreated to. Beside an impatient hand sign to follow, causing him to extract himself from a conversation, Marvolo hadn't uttered a word, or indicated in any way what he wanted.

At the moment Xerxes tried to get a sense of if he was standing here watching his Lord pace, or if his friend from school was in need of help. Depending on the answer to this question, Xerxes would have to react differently, act differently. But at the moment he had no idea what the answer might be. So he waited.

"What can I do?" Marvolo suddenly started to speak, clearly not expecting an answer. "I don't think I can do that, be what he needs." Shaking hands raked over a pale face, through previously neat hair. "I can't be… how can I even hope to…"

Xerxes slowly sat down on the desk standing behind him, watching as Marvolo paced in front of the rows of neatly hung children's drawings – mostly snowflakes and snowmen – this looked more and more like a situation where a friend was needed, not one where his Lord needed his service.

"What's wrong, Marvolo? What happened between the moment you walked away to speak with your heir and now? And don't try to claim otherwise, something did happen!" A wave of fear swept through Xerxes as Marvolo whirled around a snarl on his face.

But then the face crumpled from fierce to something vulnerable before Marvolo turned quickly away to look out of the window. "Did you know there is a Parselmouth among your students?" The question was whispered so quietly that Xerxes wasn't quite sure he had heard right.

"A Parselmouth? No?" Xerxes was confused as to how it could be that there was a Parselmouth among his students. And that confusion certainly wasn't only clear as day in his voice, but on his face as well.

Several minutes passed with Marvolo staring out of the window towards the fires and merriment, or pacing up and down while Xerxes tried to pinpoint the one student who would most likely be a descendant of Slytherin. But he didn't get very far.

"I don't think I can be a father, Xerxes. Henry is away at Hogwarts most of the year. He isn't far from being an adult. It just isn't the same…" By now Xerxes was reasonably sure that his friend was suffering from a panic attack. It wasn't anything he hadn't seen before. Men about to become fathers regularly fell into this behaviour. And those that didn't even a little usually had proven themselves as either totally uninterested or terrible fathers.

Before he could form his thoughts into a coherent explanation of why Marvolo would make at least an adequate father, the door opened and Henry Slytherin-Potter walked in. Maybe it would be best to leave, but on the other hand his Lord had wanted his presence. It would be rude to leave, but it
was equally rude to stay and listen to what certainly would be a private discussion.

"Here you are, sir. I was searching for you." At Henry's words the Dark Lord stiffened in a way Xerxes had learned to associate with extreme anger. "I brought Marcus to his teacher. What are we going to do now? When will we take him home?"

Xerxes blinked in surprise. Of course the child would go with the Dark Lord, to be with family. Now knowing more than just that one of his students at this school was a Parselmouth, Xerxes started to go through the list of enrolled students under eleven to find the one called Marcus and what he knew of him. Surely his Lord needed to know and would demand to know soon.

"Henry, you're being rash. For all we know… Marcus, is living with loving parents. We can't take a child just because we want to." Marvolo almost sounded dazed, not angry. And Xerxes valiantly tried to concentrate.

"Well, that would be better anyway. Our family would get bigger, not only Marcus, but his parents too." There was a stubborn tone to that reply, and Xerxes had to smirk. That boy certainly had a backbone, Xerxes didn't feel all that confident at the moment.

"Actually," Xerxes interrupted, with a wildly beating heart, "he's an orphan. As far as the foster system had recorded, he has no known father. His mother died from complications in childbirth. There's no other known family. So he has stayed with different foster families until we found him. The last one agreed to let him be adopted into a magical family before they were obliviated. At the time, I didn't anticipate the trouble we would have with the ancestry tests." Xerxes stopped himself from shifting nervously from one foot to the other under the gaze of the two other wizards. It was a little unnerving how alike they looked in their intensity.

Then they suddenly turned to each other and exchanged a few sentences in hissing noises. At least Xerxes assumed that they were talking to each other. It just sounded like insensible hissing to his ears.

"And how do you think this will work, Henry?" Marvolo threw his hands up into the air before resuming his pacing.

"You can hire a nanny. Have the elves help. Eat breakfast with him each day, send him here to school, then work. Be there in the evening asking what he has done the whole day. It's not that hard. You're doing it now!" The teenager had started to pace as well, and Xerxes felt superfluous. But to leave the room he would have to cross the younger wizard's path, bringing attention to himself that he would rather avoid.

Marvolo only gave a snort, and kept pacing.

"We can't just ignore the fact that he belongs to the family. In a few years others will learn about his ability, will recall that we must have known. How will we look then?" The voice of the green-eyed teenager was cutting now, almost mocking. And Xerxes had to give him a point for politically sound thinking. That would be a scandal of epic proportions. "We both know what to avoid, what not to do. And there are people we can ask for help. We can't leave him here!"

Slumping down on a desk – the chairs in this room were too small for an adult to sit comfortably on – Marvolo rubbed one hand over his face. He looked tired. "Getting custody of you was rather easy, Henry. Everyone was still shocked over my sudden reappearance. But doing the same now for a kid that young? Those valiantly against me would mount what forces they can to oppose this adoption. It won't go as smoothly as adopting you was."
Henry nodded, and sat down as well. "Well, it won't be easy then. That's no reason to not do it."
Then the boy slid into the hissing sounds of parseltongue again, excluding Xerxes from the discussion which continued for quite some time.

When the Dark Lord turned to Xerxes once again, the older-looking wizard had contemplated how best to leave – he should be out among the guests, not sequestered here in one of the classrooms – just to come to the conclusion that there was no way to leave without possibly drawing his Lord's ire.

"Can you please make sure that Marcus is informed by one of his teachers that he has remote family? Tell him that the fact he can speak to snakes made us realize, because it's a family gift. Ask him if he would be agreeable to meet with us, as we want to get to know him. I'll get my solicitor on the task of preparing everything for an adoption." Xerxes only nodded and bowed. Marvolo sounded resigned, but there still was a spark of something in the man's eyes that Xerxes wasn't used to seeing there.

Uncertainty.

It wasn't something totally new, but since the young boy by the name of Riddle had proved that he was more than a mudblood, Xerxes had never seen it again. Seeing it now made him appear human again. Trying to smile reassuringly without being patronizing, Xerxes made for the door. "I'll do that, and keep you informed."

When Xerxes was once again among all the guests, children and parents, he relaxed. It would be not easy getting Marcus under Marvolo's guardianship, but in the end there was no doubt that the gift of Parseltongue would be enough to sway those that had to decide. Family had the most influence over such decisions, and it was unlikely that that would change anytime soon.

oooOOooo

Albus sat in a quite cosy armchair in the lounge the long-term patients got to use from time to time, contemplating his possibilities.

Yesterday evening he had tried to nick a wand from the medi-witch when she had caught him scouting the hallway. He had learned that the small pockets in the robes were spelled to make sure the wand couldn't be taken out by just anyone. A sensible precaution – some of the people that were treated here shouldn't get their hands on a wand – but annoying for himself, being held here against his will and without reason.

He hadn't had any visitors today, and taking a wand would be discovered quickly, so he needed a solid escape plan before he tried to get his hands on one again.

Maybe he should take another look at the complex magical wards around the door to the ward that were keeping patients in, but which let personnel and the occasional visitor through. Albus had looked into other possible exits and had only found the windows, as the fireplaces weren't connected to the floo network. And even if he was reasonably fit for his age, climbing out of windows and down walls wasn't something he thought he could manage without trouble.

Trying to look casual, Albus got up from his seat, and wandered off, looking at pictures and portraits on the walls, a potted plant that looked to be in dire need of water, and other people sitting around, either reading, playing games, or staring into space.

When he reached the hall and walked slowly in the direction of the door, Albus huffed a breath of relief. If he could manage to look a while at the doors, he might find the conditions that regulated
who could pass the door, which would significantly increase his chances of success.

Near the door Albus started to concentrate on the door frame, trying to identify the nexus of the ward barring his exit this way. It was hard doing this without his wand, and silently, as he didn't want to risk drawing attention to what he was doing here.

"Mr. Dumbledore! There you are!" Albus flinched in surprise when the man who claimed to be a healer working for Albus' health spoke up behind him. Turning while trying to come up with a good reason for standing here, Albus placed his grandfatherly smile in place. "Healer Jugson, why were you searching for me? It's late in the evening, but not yet time to go to bed, is it?" He laughed, trying for friendly. "It makes me feel quite young again to have a curfew to be in bed. How may I help you?"

The healer smiled friendly enough, but the fact that two others – a witch and a wizard of big build – were standing just behind the man with concentrated expressions, made Albus wary. "The results of our repeat test have just come in, Mr. Dumbledore. And it seems that the extent you're affected was masked by something during the first test we did. Please come with us, we are moving you into another room. Luckily we caught this in time to adjust your healing plan so you probably will be able to leave not too far into the new year."

Before the healer – certainly one of Tom's people, he just had to be! – had finished his last word, Albus tried to run for the door. Another room? Adjustment to the healing plan? That couldn't mean anything good! But before he had reached the wards he was struck by a spell and everything went dark.

oooOOooo

It was infuriating! Normally Fenrir didn't tend to use such big words, but the current situation needed big words. There was no other way to express his anger and even come close to the real enormity of his feelings.

He was pacing here, the cracked and dirty floorboards groaning under his steps, in a ramshackle rundown hut, when he should be living in one of those manors that the wizards had built only for themselves.

With a growl that exposed only the tips of the fangs he had fashioned out of his canines so he would look more like his true self even in this inferior form, Fenrir turned to the hapless fool sitting on the faded armchair. "So you have lost another one? How is it that suddenly all of our people run away?" But Fenrir already knew the answer.

Slytherin.

His influence on the Wizengamot and the laws was eroding the ground Fenrir had build his pack on. Now the laws were changing and the members of the pack suddenly had other opportunities.

"Rob said he didn't need – or want – our help any longer. His brother offered him a job on their small farm. They grow and gather potions stuff. I think." Ted shrugged, his faded robes sliding with the motion.

With another growl Fenrir turned sharply on his heel, walking in the other direction. This wasn't good, in fact it was catastrophic. The people were leaving, his pack shrinking. And they had half a month until the moon would be full again. Much too late to act against that bastard Slytherin, or the cowards that abandoned him for the prospect of acceptance by wizards. However shaky that acceptance would be. Again turning, dust falling down from the ceiling, Fenrir sought an escape
from the dilemma he was in.

The Aurors were hunting them down, obviously knowing all of their older hideouts. Most likely the doing of Slytherin. Again.

The more intelligent and flexible wolves were deserting him and their cause, leaving for the continent, or finding shelter with wizards like common mutts. Leaving Fenrir only with those wolves who had no other options, or had been with him since they had been cubs. Sadly, not one of them knew much magic, or any at all, leaving them without options outside the transformation on the nights of the full moon.

The fact that everyone whom he wanted to hurt most was behind strong wards only added to his problems. And the so-called suicide-through-poison Yaxley had suffered. Well, there was no way that had been suicide or an accident. It clearly had been a message to the remaining Death Eaters. Who dared to even set one toe out of line was to suffer death, or worse. So it was unlikely that Fenrir would get help from those who shared his taste for fear and torture.

Without stopping in his pacing, Fenrir searched for a way to secure his position, to instil the fear of werewolves back into those pathetic witches and wizards.

He kept pacing until late that night without finding a shred of moonlight.

oooOOooo

With a sigh Marvolo slumped into the armchair in front of the fireplace in the living room at Griffin House. What a day this had been.

When he had thought about possible further Slytherin descendants, then he had thought about a slim possibility of finding an adult, or someone who had already died. Never even once had the thought crossed his mind that there might be a child he would have to take in.

And that was exactly the situation they were in now. They had to take Marcus in, just as Henry had said. It wouldn't work out any other way. If there was any way to avoid it… but there wasn't and it would be best when Marvolo stopped searching for a way to avoid the inevitable. If they didn't start with attempts to adopt Marcus right now, the moment they noticed he existed, that could be something their enemies could use against them.

Marvolo wasn't convinced that they would be able to adopt Marcus without problems, but Henry's fierce words had helped him realize that there were fewer obstacles there than he had feared.

Slowly shaking his head in remembrance, he got up again to fetch himself a tumbler of firewhiskey. Henry's claim that he would testify in favour of Marvolo so he would be able to adopt Marcus. The exact wording Henry had used still was bouncing around in Marvolo's head. That the fact that there was absolutely nothing wrong with the way Marvolo acted as a guardian was one of the things Henry had the most trouble with. That Henry had wanted to hate him in the beginning but couldn't keep doing that because he suddenly had what he always had wished for, someone who cared.

Marvolo could relate, and that fact terrified him. It was right up there on his list of terrifying thoughts of the day, next to being responsible for a boy only five years old.

He really didn't feel capable of that, and wasn't that a first. He had never thought that he couldn't do something. If he had to guess, he would say that was pretty normal for the average human, but since his childhood he never would have called himself average in anything.
Slowly sipping on his drink, staring into the flickering flames, he contemplated whether it would be a good idea to visit with Madame Goyle soon. He couldn't keep taking strong calming draughts every day for the rest of his time. As he had done today.

Chapter End Notes

I know some of you dread the addition of another Parselmouth. But I thought about it and feel it's unrealistic to not have more parselmouths around somewhere. If Lily Evans was a descendant from Slytherin, there have to be others.

Furthermore I needed a way to clearly show how much Marvolo is changing and I didn't want to invent something that would throw him and Harry back in their development for that purpose. Developing plot in such a way mostly only feels frustrating for me when I read it, I can't bear to write something like that. ;) And besides that I love the idea of "big brother Harry" so I hope you'll roll with it and see where it takes the story.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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The Ball

Chapter Notes

And here it is: chapter 70! Thanks to all of those who have made the journey with me. I think over half of the story should be written by now :D but we'll see if I will reach chapter 100.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_the middle of the night, Saturday, 23th of December_

Harry woke to being shaken at his shoulder. He opened heavy lids to a room bathed in subtle light and Marvolo sitting at the side of his bed, sounding a little panicked. "Henry! Henry, please wake up!"

Harry was awake instantly once the panic registered, sitting up just slowly enough for Marvolo to back off without their heads connecting. "What's wrong?" Harry still sounded half asleep, rubbing his eyes in an effort to get the remnants of sleep out of his eyes.

.:He's panicking:. Nagini hissed from somewhere near the door, and Harry rolled his eyes because that was the most unhelpful comment ever. And when had she started understanding plain English?

.:Nagini, I'm not panicking:. Marvolo hissed, clearly not amused, watching Harry arranging himself to get out of bed.

"Stay under the covers, Henry. I need to speak with you, but there is no reason to get up."

Harry blinked, totally confused now. Why would Marvolo come into his room in the middle of the night, wake him, and then only speak to him? But he at least wanted to see properly so he reached over to his bedside table to pick up his glasses. And to quickly check that he had covered the picture of Hogwarts he had been working on last evening. Wouldn't do for Marvolo to see it before it was finished.

When he was sitting under his warm covers, leaning against the headboard, his glasses on his nose, Harry asked again. "What's this about? Couldn't it have waited until, I don't know… breakfast?" He realized he sounded grumpy, but he was. Getting woken in the middle in the night tended to do that to him.

The look Marvolo gave him for that seemed to imply that Harry was slow, but then he started to speak, still sounding somehow off. "The day after tomorrow is Christmas Morning. And I fear we'll not have enough time to get something, and I don't even know what to get. But I feel it's really important. Or don't you agree?"

The moment Marvolo had mentioned Christmas Morning, Harry had caught on and silently was cursing himself for his stupidity. Images of him sitting in the dark, listening to the merriment of the Dursleys, a box of dog biscuits, a coin taped to a loveless card, and a single toothpick flashed before his eyes. This was important, and there wasn't a lot of time left.
Harry nodded, his thoughts racing. "Yes, you are right. We need to get him something." Even after years of the same treatment by his aunt and uncle each year, their mocking gifts had hurt him. This was important. They needed to do this right. And he would have known that even before he had spoken with Madame Goyle about the lack of presents from the Dursleys.

"But what?" Marvolo huffed a breath, and the smell of alcohol wafted over to Harry. It seemed that Marvolo was very much affected still by the thought that a small child would soon be dependent on him and his actions. That probably was a good sign. Not the alcohol, but the fact that Marvolo was working himself up over caring for Marcus.

"Something nice. But we don't know a lot about him yet..." Harry let a few possibilities run through his mind. "I think a toy, maybe. He's too young to really like a book, I think? A nice blanket? With a picture of the snake on it?" He shrugged a little helplessly. What would a six-year-old like to have as a present for Christmas. "Maybe a few sweets as well?"

Exhaling slowly, Marvolo nodded. "Sweets... that's a good start." There was a flash of pain before the mask was back in place. "I don't think we will get a blanket made in time. But I think the Tales of Beedle the Bard are maybe something for him. I know for a fact that there are a few illustrated versions out there."

.:Stop talking so much in that useless way! I want to know what's going on. If you don't speak properly, I miss most of it:. Nagini sounded like Draco when he didn't want to go out in the rain for Quidditch training as she wound her way up the side of Harry's bed. Harry felt tension falling away from him and he snorted.

.:I'll go to bed:. Marvolo hissed, patting Harry's leg where it rested under the cover. .:Come with me?:. The snake hissed to that question, waving her head in silent contemplation. Then she started to move up onto the bed and under the covers, twining her body over and around Harry's legs.

Laughing as her tongue tickled him on top of his right foot, Harry hissed an observation in Marvolo's direction. .:I think she'll stay here the rest of the night:. Marvolo laughed and stood. .:Sleep well, you two. We can't get any presents during the night anyway:. With a wave of his hand Marvolo doused the lights again, before stepping into the hall and closing the door softly behind him.

With a sigh Harry placed his glasses back on the table beside his bed, before he slid down under the covers, moving the big snake around until he was once again comfortable and slipped back into sleep.

oooOooo

Sunday, 24th of December

Carefully avoiding the ladders strewn throughout the many rooms, Draco moved swiftly from the breakfast room – where he had picked up a sandwich – to find a space where he would be safe from his mother.

After dodging a frantic house-elf, Draco made it into the music room nearest to the ritual room. It wasn't used often, but today it was occupied.

"Father, what are you doing here?" Because normally his father would be in the middle of organizing, or back in his study getting some paperwork out of the way. Finding him in a spot great to hide in was unexpected.
With a weary sigh Lucius closed the book he had been reading, looking up to his son. "I didn't sleep well last night. Your mother kept turning and tossing around. Not that she woke up." Draco's father gave another sigh, "I have a headache, and the potion hasn't kicked in yet. So please, stay quiet."

Draco just nodded, wondering how it was that his mother's sleeping habits all of a sudden disturbed the man who had slept beside her for over a decade already. But who was he to judge? Maybe his father just had had a bad dream and didn't want his son to know. So Draco walked over to the bench set in front of the piano to eat his sandwich with ham, mayonnaise, and tomato slices.

As much as he looked forward to the ball, meeting all his friends, dancing with Astoria, he could do without all the hubbub and unrest created by the preparations.

When an elf came into the room, vanishing dust from flat surfaces and the carpet, then starting to float garlands of greenery – Draco didn't care to get close enough to identify what kind of conifer it was – to the ceiling, both Draco and his father fled again.

Maybe taking refuge in his own room, pretending to work on his homework or revision, would give him the calm he wanted to have.

ooooOOooo

When Henry walked in for breakfast the next morning, Marvolo was already reading the article about the festival in the Daily Prophet. All in all it was a complimentary article, with an emphasis on the quality of education offered to the children, as well as the fact that it gave young muggle-born witches and wizards an opportunity to acclimate themselves earlier to the way things were in magical Britain.

"Good morning, Henry." He greeted the boy with a smile, working hard not to blush over his irrational behaviour of the night before. Mixing a strong calming draught with alcohol wasn't the best idea he had ever had. Not the worst – by far – but certainly not the best. Waking the boy in the middle of the night, what had he been thinking?

"Good morning." Henry didn't look all too awake, slowly taking his seat at the table and almost mechanically filling his plate with his usual favourites.

"Didn't sleep well?" Marvolo folded the newspaper, placing it to the side, and started to prepare another cup of coffee. The headache he had awoken to luckily had reacted favourably to the sobering potion he had taken.

Henry shook his head. "Every time I turned I woke because Nagini got in the way. She's decided to spend the day on the rug in front of the fireplace in the study."

Marvolo felt his eyes go round as Henry filled his mug with coffee instead of tea, adding lots of milk and sugar.

"Are you sure that you should get up? The evening is going to be a late one. Usually such a ball doesn't end until well into the night." Marvolo took a sip from his sweet coffee, taking in Henry's ruffled hair and pale face. "I recommend you at least take a nap before we depart later this afternoon."

Before he could elaborate why he thought that was a good idea, or bring up what they had discussed in the middle of the night, he felt as one of his Death Eaters called for him.

What now? Marvolo hoped, for the sake of whoever was calling, that they had a really good reason
to disrupt his breakfast like that.

He good up with a sigh, quickly draining his coffee and snatching up an apple to take along, and
looked over to Henry, who now suddenly looked a lot more attentive. "Everything all right?" The
teenager asked.

"I don't know yet," Marvolo answered already preparing to leave. "But I'll find out."

Henry looked worried. "So you have no idea? They wouldn't call unless it was important, would
they?"

"Flimm! My cloak!" He needed to make sure Henry didn't needlessly worry, because there was no
reason to. "Besides the order to look for children in dangerous situations who might need help, and
the one to have bigger families, there are no orders that all of them have. Maybe someone has
found Fenrir?" He shrugged and accepted the cloak from the elf. "Don't worry. I don't plan to leave
Headquarters. I'll be quick." And he planned to be.

"Good." Henry nodded. "I'll start on the transfiguration essay."

Swinging the cloak around his shoulders, Marvolo swept from the room and made for the floo
room to apparate over to Headquarters. He really hoped that there was a good reason to call on him
today, of all days.

ooOoo

Once again Jeremy was waiting for his Lord, not sure how his questions would be taken. To keep
his mind from falling into blind panic – how he could work in an emergency situation at the
hospital but be so nervous now, he didn't know – Jeremy wondered if the others were equally
nervous whenever they had something urgent they had to tell their Lord. Or was it just him?

Suddenly the door to the audience chamber opened with enough force to make it crash into the
wall. Without hesitation Jeremy fell to his knees, bending low to the ground, struggling to keep his
breath calm. He wished Dumbledore's test results had come a few days later. Then he wouldn't
have had to call his Lord during the days surrounding Christmas and Yule. But there wasn't a thing
he could change. He just had to hope that the stable state of mind the Dark Lord had displayed
since his return would hold out.

"What's so terribly important, Jeremy Jugson, that it couldn't wait a few more days?" the Dark Lord
demanded to know the moment he took the last steps to come to stand in front of Jeremy's hands
where they rested on the wooden floor.

"I received the results of a test we repeated on a patient. It had come to my attention that he wasn't
improving as he should have. It seems as if he had taken a potion to mask the effects of the
dangerous magic affecting him. The results of the new test show how severe the damage really is.
His treatment could go either way. He could regain his health – with a little luck – or lose his life,
if he is really unlucky. I'm contemplating giving a little more responsibility to one of our junior
healers. I'm feeling a little under the weather, and might need a few days off. But I wanted to ask
what you wish me to do, my Lord." Jeremy quickly reported his reason to be here – maybe that
would help the man keep calm – making sure his Lord could infer from his report that there was a
chance to kind of sabotage the treatment of Mr. Dumbledore. Because his oaths made it impossible
for him to directly cause harm to a person under his care as a healer.

Shivering in fear, or because the floor was cold – he wasn't really that sure which was the cause –
Jeremy waited with anxiety growing in his stomach with each moment the Dark Lord stayed silent.
Marvolo allowed himself a few slow blinks. It wasn't as if Jeremy could see his shock from his position on the floor, where he was prostrating himself as was proper. Or more likely as he, as Voldemort, had deemed proper in his insane days of the past. Maybe the healer had expected his Lord to be in an extra foul mood because of the hour and date.

But what shocked Marvolo more was the fraction of a second he had hesitated to make a rational decision. Why would he hesitate? Why would emotions come in the way of rational planning?

"Wouldn't it be suspicious if you were to sabotage his treatments?" First rule of any planning, plotting, and decision making: get more information. As much information as possible. Then he would weight the pros and cons, consider the consequences as well as his goals, before coming to a rational decision.

His hatred for Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore wouldn't override his common sense. And his pity and guilt over what the curse he had designed and placed on the ring had caused for the old Headmaster wouldn't dictate his actions either.

Marvolo never had thought that it was possible to feel hate and pity for the same person at the same time. It certainly was disconcerting, and led him to the theory that the last piece of his soul to return had restored even more of his humanity.

"It shouldn't be, my Lord. Such cases are never entirely predictable. At the current moment, everything between a full recovery and death is a possibility. The most likely outcome is some permanent damage to the old man's mind. It should be easy enough to make sure the treatment is altered just enough to favour a less positive outcome, my Lord."

Jeremy sounded confident, but manipulations were always prone to discovery, and the fact that the permanent damage to Dumbledore – and especially the old goat's death – would certainly fall under intense scrutiny didn't make it any better.

Tapping a finger of his right hand against his lip, Marvolo quickly went through his options, keeping up tight shields around his mind to keep his turbulent emotions in check. "Don't risk your place at the hospital. Do your best to heal the old idiot. You might be able to improve our knowledge and the healers' capabilities in such matters. That is much more important than that Dumbledore is damaged further."

And it was more important. With everything the old man had already lost, and now this prolonged stay in the hospital, it was highly unlikely that he would regain as much influence as he had once held.

"Was there anything else you wanted to inform me about?" This was in a way good news, but it still had interrupted breakfast with Henry, and their possibility to talk a bit more about the young boy they had discovered yesterday.

"No, my Lord, this was all. I ask for your forgiveness that I dared to interrupt your day, my Lord."

As the healer was still cowering on the ground, Marvolo allowed himself to roll his eyes. Sometimes the extreme reverence got on his nerves. "You're forgiven. Go. Report back – a written report will do – if there are any new developments." So dismissed, the healer stood, bowed again, then left.

Marvolo waited a moment until the other had left, before he made his way out as well.
have to explain to Henry what he had learned and then somehow get his hands on a few chocolate frogs and an illustrated version of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*.

oooOOooo

London had volunteered to explain to the kid what had happened the day before and what would happen next because of it. He had seen the boy during breakfast with only those present who were living here. All other students wouldn't be back until a week into the new year. And now he was searching for Marcus, as he had thought it would be better to talk with him in a more private setting.

As he had thought he would, London found him in the biology classroom with his face pressed against the glass of the terrarium, hissing. If he hadn't known better, London would have guessed that the young child simply was playing, pretending to speak to a snake.

London took a seat near the terrarium, making a little noise, to wait until Marcus would switch his attention from the snake to the human in the room.

"Hello, Mr. London!" the boy whirled around, the short robes he wore over his trousers and pullover, swinging. "Did you know that a snake can feel people walking in because the floor shakes with every step?" Almost jumping, Marcus came over and looked up curiously. "Is it already lunch time?"

"No," London smiled and patted the chair standing at the same table he had sat down at. "I wanted to talk with you about the two men who helped your snake friend yesterday. Do you remember them?"

Suddenly Marcus looked alarmed. "Are they in trouble?"

Inwardly smirking over the little boy's worries, London shook his head. "No, they aren't in trouble. After all, they helped a snake in danger. Why should they be in trouble for that?"

Reassured, Marcus nodded solemnly, and sat down.

"But they noticed that you, like them, are able to speak with snakes. That's an ability that runs in only one family. They are distant family to you, and would like to get to know you better, now that they know you're here." London had contemplated many different ways to break the news, since Lord Lestrange had approached him about this the previous evening. But in the end there was no way to do this *delicately*, as some people might insist this should be handled. So he had decided to be honest and keep his explanations to words a boy not yet able to write all letters would understand.

Marcus' brow furrowed in concentration. "Why didn't they know? I could have lived with them."

"Because the connection between them and you is way in the past. Way before your parents, or even your grandparents. The family didn't stay together, so they don't know where else there might be people with the ability to speak to snakes. They only found each other this past summer." How did one explain family feuds, disinheriting of Squibs, and other factors unknown to a child? As London didn't even know what, of all the possibilities, had been the reason that the descendants of the Slytherin family had been lost, he decided to go with the common outcome of all those. Losing contact.

London watched as Marcus thought that through. "I would like to meet them. They seemed nice. Can I go play now?"
"Sure you can." He watched as Marcus went back to the snake, hissed a few words – probably it was several words, there was no way to be sure – and then ran out of the room, probably over to where the others were playing a game of cards.

That had not gone the way London had expected it to go. He had either expected anger over the fact he had been alone so long, or over-enthusiastic happiness. But he guessed, as the small guy couldn't be sure what would happen, this was a reasonable reaction. From what little he had learned about how Lord Slytherin handled himself around his adopted son, he had at least some hope that this would work out to be something positive for the child.

oooOOooo

A few passes with a comb, and Harry was happy with the way his hair was styled. Now that it was a bit longer, and he had used the potion which had worked out best from those he had picked up in Hogsmeade, it was a little bit more controlled. Not enough that he felt like a swot neat as a pin, but more as if he had really used a brush for once.

With a chuckle and a nervous gesture neatening his robes, Harry deemed himself ready.

A chuckle made him turn. Marvolo was standing behind him his robe over one arm, slacks, gleaming black dress-shoes, a silken embroidered dress-shirt already donned. "You look good. Why the sudden interest in your appearance? Are you interested in Miss Greengrass?" There was a teasing note to Marvolo's voice, and Harry responded by sticking his tongue out. He wasn't in the mood to be teased.

"No, I'm not. As you well know. She asked me to go with her as a friend. Nothing more." Time to change the topic, "You look good as well." And he did. Currently his eyes weren't glamoured just yet, so the vibrant red stood out from his dark hair and pale skin.

"Go on. Miss Greengrass is waiting for you. We'll meet up at Malfoy Manor." With a nod Harry stepped over to the floo and the ornate box on the mantle. A pinch of floo-powder in hand he stepped into the fireplace calling out his destination.

A nauseating trip with a lot of whirling later, Harry stepped out of the floo over at Greengrass Manor. The room was richly decorated with a plush carpet, silk-covered walls, and a painting on the ceiling depicting some mythological scene.

Before Harry could start to wonder what to do now, an elf popped into existence right in front of him, making him jump. Even after weeks with elves of his own, he hadn't become accustomed to their penchant for popping up unexpectedly. "Young Master, good evening! Please wait here, young Mistress comes down soon." And with another pop the elf was gone.

Luckily for Harry it didn't take long until Daphne came into the room, closely followed by her parents and her younger sister Astoria. With a smile and a bow Harry greeted his date for the day before he turned to Lord and Lady Greengrass to bow again. It was kind of terrifying to be here on his own with so little actual training in these matters, representing the two families he was heir to. Truly terrifying.

But Harry always had been good at working under pressure, and this wasn't a situation where death was a real possibility – unlike against those Dementors in the forest – and judging by the smiles on everyone's faces, if he did something wrong, it wouldn't be held against him.

"Harry, what did you do to your hair?" Daphne blurted out, breaking the socially acceptable, but stilted, atmosphere.
Harry grinned when he answered. "I let it grow out a little, helped along with a potion, and then worked still more potions into it. I definitely am not vain enough to go to that much trouble on a normal day at school, but for something like today it's worth all the hassle."

"I remember the days I could do just that with fondness," Lord Greengrass drily remarked before turning to his wife, taking her hand in his.

Her eyes were sparkling with amusement, and for a short moment Harry wondered what story the both of them were remembering. "I like your robes, Heir Slytherin-Potter. Are those flames? This year's theme was a real problem to match robes to," Daphne's mother asked with kind curiosity.

To that Harry could do little more than nod. It had been hard. "Father came up with the idea of what hospitality means in different cultures. There are differences, but offering shelter and food are almost universal. Neither of us wanted to go as loaves of bread, or something like that, so we went with the warmth of fire. Like the one in the home's hearth." Remembering part of that discussion Harry snorted. Seeing the questioning glances he explained without being prompted. "A young witch – I guess an apprentice – suggested we should incorporate images of animals in the flames, to add a bit of variation. Father said that would have been a design fit for a Dark Lord, earning him some horrified looks. When he explained that such a design would be reminiscent of Fiendfyre, the idea was quickly brushed aside."

Everyone laughed, but Harry was pretty sure there was tension on Lord Greengrass' face. So, as Harry had guessed – because the man's younger brother was a Death Eater – this Lord was sworn to Marvolo as well.

"So the dark colour at the top is to stand for the chimney, and the sparkling vest over your shirt is for the embers?" Astoria asked, intently inspecting the embroidery on the fine silken material of Harry's robes.

Again Harry smoothed down the material. He wore dark brown slacks from wool, standing for the wood used to feed the flames, of course, a white shirt with a bright red, sparkling vest over it, and the robe getting darker at the top covered with embroidered flames springing up from the hem on top of it all.

Daphne was in a dress of silk in mixed shades of yellow and orange going to her ankles, with an almost sheer robe over it – a few strips of dark fabric created intricate designs on the over-robe – mimicking the effects of a lantern. She obviously had decided to pick the theme of offering light to the visitor from the list their tailor had provided when challenged to find matching themes and colour schemes for the two of them.

"You look really great, Daphne." Harry suddenly had realized that he should compliment his date. It wasn't as if he had to lie. She looked great with the lighter, colder colours of her lantern ensemble, her hair done up into something which looked too complicated to comprehend without hours of study.

"Shall we go?" Lord Greengrass asked, and Harry, once again resorting to what he had learned over the summer, stepped up to Daphne, offering her his arm, and then offered his other arm to Astoria, so he would escort both girls through the floo and over to Malfoy Manor. Draco would be there to greet them and keep Astoria entertained, while Harry was expected to move around with Daphne to give her the chance to attract the interest she needed to find herself a wizard to marry who wouldn't bore her to death, or make her life hell in a different way.

Steeling himself for the evening to come, Harry walked into the Floo, a girl on each arm, calling out their destination. "Malfoy Manor!"
It hadn't really been all that long, but Draco wished he could move to the buffet in the other room now instead of when everyone had arrived. Standing here next to his parents, greeting all the guests as was now expected of him – it had been so much easier before he had turned thirteen – was getting tiring fast.

And what for? The buffoons that worked at the Ministry. Of course the theme his mother had selected for this year was ridiculous, but some of the costumes people had chosen to wear were even worse. The decorations were wonderful, as they were every year, but Draco was sure he had counted the red shimmering globes standing in for berries among the green leaves of ivy and holly at least a dozen times by now to keep himself from rolling his eyes when another wizard or witch made the same comments to his mother.

Was there a limited list of comments one could make to a witch expecting another child after the first one was almost an adult? The blond was contemplating to start compiling a list when Harry came through the floo between two of their fellow Slytherins, the girls' parents on their heels.

Astoria looked good in her velvet dress and robe combination. It matched Draco's own in texture and didn't clash in colour, making them two matching warm blankets like those that were to be found in every parlour and bedroom the Manor had to offer.

"Astoria, Daphne, Harry. How nice to see you! You look good. And Harry, you managed to find a brush able to tame your hair… some." That earned him chuckles and one playful glare, easing away some of the tension that standing here had caused to gather in Draco's back. Draco greeted Astoria by grasping both her hands in his, gently squeezing them, before he offered the polite bow required of him. He exchanged a bow for a curtsy with Daphne and a bow for a bow with Harry. "I'll find you once I can leave here. Theo and his family are already here. I didn't see Heiress Lestrange yet."

And there was another wave of guests, forcing the others to move on into the halls decorated for the ball. So with a little internal sigh – his mother hadn't let him get away with complaining at these things since he had been eight – Draco turned back to his duty as part of the group of hosts.

Together Severus and Sonja stepped out of the floo into the mass of others on their way to greet the hosts of this evening. With a wave of his wand Severus removed the inevitable soot from both Sonja and himself. Sometimes he wondered why exactly no witch or wizard had come up with a more comfortable – and clean – method of travel. Maybe there was no way to keep the speed, but get rid of the unpleasant aspects. By no means was Severus an expert in that kind of magic.

With a smile Narcissa greeted them both. "Severus, Sonja! How wonderful that you could make it. I had feared duties as Head of House Slytherin at Hogwarts would prevent you from coming," Narcissa gushed in her usual enthusiastic way, while Lucius gave Severus a look clearly communicating that he knew that, if not for Severus' wife, the Potions Master would have indeed claimed some trouble at school in order to stay away.

But Severus actually wasn't all that sure he would have done that. Now that he was Lord Prince, it wasn't as if he could continue to ignore the whole hassle of socializing any longer. And even knowing that he had taken on the title, now he had to live with the consequences of his actions.

They made place for the next guests to be greeted and moved over to the ballroom, where Sonja stifled a laugh and at Severus' questioning look moved her head to indicate a couple standing to the...
side, both looking like slices of cake. They really were dressed up as slices of cake, as if they had
either transfigured their robes to take on the form of enormous cake pieces, or had enlarged real
cake slices.

"Ridiculous," Severus murmured. "Cake… who with a shred of dignity pretends to be a cake?"

Sonja snorted, giving her skirt and robes a little twirl. "The theme wasn't that easy to use, love." Severus supposed he had to concede the point. After all, they had thought over one week to come
up with the idea of dressing in robes inspired by glasses full of dark red wine. It had taken some
convincing from Sonja to get him into red robes, but as it wasn't Gryffindor red, it was better than
being a cake.

"Maybe. But not everyone makes their robes match the theme." He waved his hand in the direction
of some people in perfectly normal formal wear. "So why dress up as a cake?"

Sonja's only response was another laugh, before she dragged him onto the dance floor. Severus
willingly followed her, before he took over the lead. "You look absolutely wonderful this evening,
my love," he murmured into her ear, before spinning them both around. "Let's dance and enjoy the
evening as long as we can."

Sonja laughed again. "You sound like it's a dangerous mission."

"Speaking with a bunch of politicians? It's not that dangerous, but most of it is even more boring
and at the same time as challenging as teaching a class of first-years."

And they did enjoy the dancing, the fine food, and even a conversation or two. All in all, Severus
was sure pretty fast that it was a good thing he had managed to avoid attending in the past. Without
Sonja by his side, he was pretty sure he would have made so many sarcastic comments that
everyone would be avoiding him pretty soon. And that would have been all right with Severus. But
now, with Sonja by his side, everything was different, and better.

ooOoo

Music played by actual humans filled the air. Harry maneuvered Daphne through the crowd of
people dancing. It was actually fun, now that he knew what he was doing. Much more fun than it
had been last year, when he had been forced to attend with only one measly dancing lesson for
preparation.

"What do you think? Have you caught the eye of someone you would like to meet?" Harry still had
trouble with the concept of arranged marriages, and especially the easy way his Slytherin
classmates seemed to accept the necessity of such arrangements. He was so glad Marvolo had
promised to not subject him to an arranged marriage, even though he insisted on a contract to
regulate the terms of a marriage he wanted to enter. It was just the done thing. If he were to ask
Hermione, he certainly would have a list of arguments for or against marriage contracts within a
week. At most.

"Maybe. It's hard to judge. There aren't many close to our age that would be older than me. The
war put a damper on the number of children born. If I go for a younger wizard, there are a few
more. But many are only children, and so are out of the running anyway. Maybe I'll have to look
outside of Britain, because I certainly will not marry a second cousin." She shuddered dramatically
to emphasize the point, and Harry had to agree. What Marvolo had told him about the effects of
inbreeding in the remaining lines of Slytherin House he knew about had reinforced the idea not to
marry anyone even remotely related to himself.
Once the dance was over, they stepped away from each other, bowed – or curtseyed – to each other, before Harry offered his arm. He felt transplanted into one of the Jane Austen films from the BBC that Aunt Petunia had watched from time to time, with all the bowing he had to do in this one evening.

"Would you like to take a break, maybe drink something?" Harry hoped she would agree, he was parched.

"That sounds lovely," was Daphne's answer, so they wandered over to the buffet set up in another big room attached to the ballroom, but far enough removed that talking was a little bit easier, the music not overpowering everything.

When they came up to the punch bowl, and the many pitchers of different beverages – magically refilling, of course – Harry asked Daphne for her preferences before addressing the man standing behind the table waiting to fill small cup-like glasses.

"Daphne! Harry! I finally found you! That's harder than I would have guessed." Hermione came over to them, smiling, her face flushed with excitement, Theo and the little guy Aiden trailing her.

"Hermione! Did you come with Lord Lestrange?" Harry asked while handing a glass of red berry lemonade to Daphne.

"Yes, I did. We both were invited, and my parents didn't feel comfortable attending such a prestigious event. They claim to need more time to acclimate. But mom insisted that I'll have to tell her every little detail."

Harry smiled at his eager friend, she clearly was excited and watched everything as if she was an explorer who had snuck into some secret society, gathering what information she could before she had to flee again.

They each got a drink and then drifted over to where the pastries were to be found. There were treacle tarts so tiny that Harry could have easily fit three of them in his palm. All of it was rather bite-sized, giving them the opportunity to sample quite a few different ones without being in danger of overindulging.

"Theo, I do want to have another of the chocolate ones, please," Aiden asked of his brother, as he was too short to reach that far on his own.

They fell into easy conversation, resting a little, drinking and eating to refill their reserves. The evening could get quite late, or so Draco had told them.

They watched two more dances, during which Draco arrived with Astoria, happy to be with their younger friends and away from the adults. Then a piece started that Harry had dreaded during their dancing lessons.

Hermione's eyes started to glow. She loved such dances, and when Harry took a look at Daphne, he just knew he wasn't going to get out of this one. "Do you want to dance, Aiden?" Hermione asked the young boy, who nodded enthusiastically. Harry assumed that seeing all the adults do it made the young Aiden want to dance as well. Draco asked Astoria for a dance and, because Theo subtly shook his head with a grin, Harry did as well, knowing by now that ignoring his date at a ball was rude, and he had to make sure she enjoyed herself. He led her onto the dance floor to join in an old-fashioned line dance still well liked in the wizarding part of Britain.

ooOoo
As was customary at such gatherings, like this ball a few of the members of the Wizengamot had slowly moved over to a small study for a discussion. Marvolo was part of the group gathered there, a glass of fine wine in one hand, a small plate of petit fours floating next to his free hand. Lucius had selected a nice room with a big fireplace, a lot of comfortable seats – mostly armchairs, and two wingback chairs – and the walls covered in bookshelves.

Currently Amos Diggory – father of the boy Wormtail had killed – was speaking passionately about the need to make those who had anything other than pure human ancestry register. He wanted to start with werewolves, go on to those with veela in their ancestry, then those descended from giants, goblins, and any and all others who could reproduce with humans.

It was a ridiculous notion. It would bring nothing but data to prosecute those with mixed ancestry. Not increased security or any of the other benefits Diggory and those still remaining of Umbridge's group claimed they wanted to achieve.

It was similar to a plan Marvolo had contemplated in his past. Registering all so-called muggle-born witches and wizards had been part of Voldemort's agenda. Now he knew, of course, how useless those plans had been.

Marvolo prepared to cut in – there was no way he could let something dangerous like that happen – when Madame Longbottom stepped up to Diggory. "Don't be an idiot, Amos. What you are talking about sounds suspiciously like some of the things Grindelwald did." The old witch was forceful with her accusation. And she was right. Targeting minorities within the magical community had been a part of Grindelwald's campaign. He had needed to control those that were not as firmly integrated into the magical community as witches and wizards born into it.

"Madame Longbottom! My only son was killed by a dark wizard." The hateful but short look thrown in Marvolo's direction made clear enough who Diggory blamed for Cedric's death. "How can you even think I would agree with something a dark wizard would do?"

Marvolo rolled his eyes, took a sip from his wine, and picked up one of the sweet little cakes. Those methods never had been tied to an ideology, but had been used by all totalitarian regimes throughout time and space.

"The way werewolf attacks have declined since we have made it easier for them to lead a law-abiding life, and the fact that there isn't even a hint of people with mixed ancestry causing more trouble than any other part of the population, should be evidence enough that there isn't any reason to implement such dangerous, and useless, methods." Marvolo spoke clearly, slowly. There was no need to rush this. It was more like he needed to be careful. The poison Dolores Umbridge had been spreading obviously had deeper roots than Marvolo had thought.

Lord Black stepped away from one of the shelves, turning to involve himself in the discussion. "You needn't be dark to do bad things, Amos. And targeting people for being different will not bring your son back." The harsh words were spoken softly, but nonetheless sent Amos Diggory running from the room.

The tense silence didn't last long, then the discussions moved over to their thoughts on the regulation of what was termed dangerous but needed magic. Like portkeys, certain wards, the floo network, and others of that calibre.

Marvolo listened, and he listened well, because when he was to start his attempts to change the laws regarding so-called dark magic, he needed a good picture of where everyone of influence stood on this and similar topics.
It was really late when Marvolo finally went to collect Henry so they both could go home.

oooOOooo

Now that everyone had pretty much accepted that Lord Marvolo Slytherin was a normal – pretty boring – member of the Wizengamot, Rita was in desperate need of a new story. And now she was in hot pursuit of what she was sure was the next big hit on her list of successes.

As the anti-bug wards around the hospital did nothing to keep Rita away, even in her form as a bug, all she had to do was avoid being seen. Because a bug in a hospital was in danger of being squashed on principle when spotted.

So she had clung to the folds of the cloak of a patient hurrying to get through the doors, and then had used the disturbance of a flying girl to move over to the leaves of a flowerpot someone was delivering to one of the patients. That manoeuvre had brought her up to the right floor and into the right department.

The people didn't appreciate what a hard job she had. They all believed she just wrote down whatever she got told by people. But now, getting the right story before anyone else meant hard work. Sneaking around, risking her health and freedom to bring them entertainment.

Seeing her best chance this evening in an open door, Rita took the opportunity to fly over the corridor and slipped into what looked like a staff room.

A quick look around and she spotted a high shelf filled with boxes of what looked like notes and patient files. That would provide enough cover so she wouldn't be spotted while she listened to the two healers who at the moment were chatting idly, while preparing themselves a cup of tea, or maybe coffee.

Her buzzing was concealed by the sound of coffee being poured into cups, the rattling of spoons against the side of mugs, so she managed to safely reach the top and settled between two boxes, her faceted eyes watching as the two wizards in lime-green robes settled down, thoughtful expressions on their face.

"How good are his chances, do you think? Will he make it?"

"Dumbledore?" The healer rubbed his eyes, taking a sip from his mug. "Maybe. The fact that he actively was sabotaging his treatments has worsened his prospects. But it's possible that we have caught on just in time." He sighed, and Rita was listening intently. Her hunch had been right. There was a story here.

"Do you want to start a betting pool?" There was a moment of silence in which they just were looking at each other. "Okay, okay. Don't look like that. You have to agree that it's tempting. We don't have such a complex case all that often. They're either so far gone, that we only can help keep them calm and from causing harm, or it's so early that they're better within weeks. A case where the outcome is such a toss-up... you can't blame us for betting. And then he is such a big figure. Jeremy," the healer ended in a whine, then huffed, "you're no fun!"

"This is serious. So come on, let's go over the treatment plan again."

They got out some parchment and quills, sliding into heavily technical language. Rita listened, memorising what she could. The only weak spot she had found over all the years in her animagus form was that she wasn't able to take notes. But she had trained her memory to the best of her ability. Someday soon she wouldn't need to take notes any longer.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all reviewers! Those that write only once, those that write often! You help me keep my drive despite many distractions (I got a graphic tablet for my birthday!)

On an unrelated note: my condolences to all those people out there in the world who need to put others down to feel better about themselves. You must live in such a sad world.

And a few pieces of advice:

If you don't like a story, go find another one. There are so many out there, one should suit you.

If you have very specific ideas of how something should go, write a story yourself! It's not that hard! Just start and get going! That's what I did ;)

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Monday, 25th of December

The morning after the ball, Marvolo moved silently from the door to Henry’s room down to get himself his breakfast. Henry was still asleep, not really surprising after the late night they had had.

The scent of the usual foods offered for breakfast reached him before he had reached the ground floor. Everything looked homely. The warm light from candles and the fire in the fireplace, the tasteful decoration – and Marvolo really had doubted something like that was even possible – and the way the table had been laid, filled Marvolo with calm.

On the way here he had passed the parlour where the tree stood. This was Henry’s and his first Christmas together. And as they both knew only too well, a family Christmas was important. That was why they had made sure Marcus would get something from them.

So Marvolo decided to drink some tea, eat a few waffles with honey and the sweet cherry sauce the elves had prepared for today, and wait for Henry to wake up. They would unwrap their presents together. As a family.

Christmas had always been important at Wool’s. Each child got something new to wear and something like a treat. A piece of fruit, hard candy, once even chocolate. But when he had arrived at Hogwarts, he had seen what the children with a proper family had been sent each year. It had driven home how unwanted all of the orphans really were.

Hopefully the fact that Henry and he had sent some extra presents wouldn’t cause trouble and tension to rise among the children staying over at Xerxes’ school. With a frustrated huff Marvolo steered his thoughts down another path. It was irritating to care about the feelings of others. It had been tolerable as long as it had been confined to Henry, and the few of his followers he knew the longest and who were actually useful, or loyal. But now it seemed to extend towards people he hadn’t actually met.

To spend the time somewhat productively – and to distract himself – Marvolo reached for the Daily Prophet waiting next to the bowl with fresh fruits. He skimmed a few articles until he reached one titled *Dumbledore dangerously ill*. He just had to read that one.
your own. But Albus Dumbledore did just that, and then was stubborn enough not to accept help from the knowledgeable and kind Lord Slytherin (see more on how the remarkable wizard has made his return on page 7) when it was offered.

And now shocking revelations have reached our office. There have been some rumours that the curse had negative effects on the old Headmaster, which he ignored. Only to be found out by the competent school medi-witch, who consulted an expert, which led to the Headmaster being admitted to St. Mungo’s for treatment. But before Albus Dumbledore agreed to cooperate, the Board of Governors had to intervene.

So far so usual. A lot of professional curse-breakers and the occasional Auror have to be treated to combat the negative effects of the magic they encounter in their daily work.

But reliable sources inside the hospital have informed me that, unlike normal cases, this one has no foregone conclusion. It’s still unsure if the old Headmaster will even manage to survive his unfortunate clash with dangerous magic caused by his own overconfidence. And even if he does survive, it’s uncertain if and how his mind will be affected.

I’m no parent, but if one would ask me, regardless of the outcome of the excellent treatment the healers are providing, I wouldn’t be comfortable with him retraining his position as headmaster. There would be no way to tell how compromised he might be. If he even manages to survive. Of course, the healers and the Board of Governors will have to decide that when the time comes, and I’m sure they will take all aspects into consideration.

But until the outcome is clear, let us all hope the renowned healers of St. Mungo’s will be able to help Albus Dumbledore to overcome the consequences of his error back in the summer.

It was fascinating how Rita Skeeter always managed to get such information. The fact that Dumbledore had broken some protection and been cursed had been all over the country when it had happened. It hadn’t been in the newspaper, but everyone and their aunt had talked about it.

But how had she managed to get that information from the hospital? That was a mystery. Just like the pictures of him from back at the Malfoy’s garden party in the summer. The reporter was certainly crafty and cunning. Especially when her stories were playing into Marvolo’s plans.

Marvolo was almost finished with the crossword puzzle on the back of the newspaper – just filling in Hades for Greek god of death – when Henry made an appearance. They had spoken briefly before going to their own rooms yesterday, and had agreed that it would be best to sleep as long as possible as they were expecting company in the afternoon.

“Good morning, and happy Christmas, Henry. I hope you have slept well.”

“Happy Christmas to you too, and I did,” Henry answered, a small smile on his face. “But the scents of a good breakfast have been luring me away from bed for the past hour or so. I could no longer ignore my stomach demanding food. Did you sleep well?”

As Marvolo had noticed Henry kept omitting any form of address when speaking with him. Neither sir, nor Marvolo was added most of the time. And even more surprising was that Marvolo didn’t feel it was done out of lacking respect. So he let it slide.

“Yes, I had a restful night. How did you like your first big ball? Did it meet with your expectations?”
Henry snorted while filling his plate with a wide variety of foods. “It did. And I’m happy that so many of my schoolmates were there as well. We could dodge most of the adults that way. Dancing was more fun than I had hoped for. Even those line-dances. I hadn’t thought it would be possible. And the food was good. Do you think the Malfoys will get leftovers to eat for the rest of the year? There was so much food there. It’s impossible that all of it was eaten yesterday.”

Marvolo hummed. It was true the plates never got any emptier regardless of how late the hour got. There would have been many leftovers, as Henry called them. But it seemed that this was a normal occurrence in any magical household. There had always been an abundance of food at Hogwarts. Even during a time when the muggle part of Britain had to ration food and other supplies, there always seemed to be enough of everything in Diagon Alley and at Hogwarts. “I’m not really sure. But I would guess that neither Narcissa nor Lucius would allow leftovers to be served at any of their tables.” Now it was Henry who made a non-committal sound, continuing with his breakfast, once again fixing himself a cup of coffee with milk and sugar instead of the tea that was also offered.

“The others wanted to know if we managed to help the snake at the festival. After all, they were there when Marcus came to get you for help. I told them that the snake is well, but haven’t told them anything about Marcus or that he is a Parselmouth like we are. I wanted to ask you first when the best time would be to tell someone. Because I would prefer my friends to learn about it from me, and not the Daily Prophet or the rumour mill.”

Slowly nodding, Marvolo set his cup down. It truly would be better they informed selected people of their wish to take Marcus into their family before the Daily Prophet put their spin on it. “When the holidays are over and I can go to the Ministry to set things in motion, I think. Maybe we should inform a few others – like your godfather – earlier. But I guess we should try to keep this out of the public eye as long as we can manage.” He threw Henry a significant look and was rewarded with a nod.

They finished their breakfast in companionable silence.

“Finished?” Marvolo asked when Henry had emptied his plate and was only toying with his empty cup.

Henry only nodded, and Marvolo held back a sigh. It wasn’t all that surprising that this morning was turning into something strained. They both weren’t accustomed to family life and had probably heaped more expectations on this day than would be considered healthy. So Marvolo quickly thought about how he would break the tension if this was him trying to gain someone as an ally. It probably wasn’t the best way to do this, but breaking the tension had to be better than letting it stand.

“Let’s go over to the parlour and take a look at all the parcels stacked underneath the tree. We should see what everyone got for us before your godfather makes an appearance. He surely will want to see what you think of his gift.” Marvolo’s attempt to break the tension was rewarded with a grin, and they both quickly stood from the table to walk over to the parlour, taking a big step to avoid stepping on Nagini who had opted to rest in the middle of the door, blocking the way.

Sometimes his familiar puzzled him with her behaviour.

ooOoo
When Harry stepped over the threshold into the parlour, he stopped for a moment. The tree was magnificent. Candles and fairy-lights sparkled from every part of it, miniature apples, glittering snowflake ornaments, and icicles dangled from the branches. The scent of spices, hot beeswax, and pine needles filled the air. The large number of parcels under the tree itself, all of them wrapped in colourful and glimmering paper, grabbed Harry’s attention next. Surely those weren’t all just for Marvolo and him?

An amused voice sounded from just outside the door. “Go in, Henry. We should start unwrapping. And I would advise you to write down who sent you what. It is required to send notes of thanks to each of them.”

Harry groaned and gave Marvolo a narrowed gaze over his shoulder, but he walked into the room and knelt by the tree nonetheless.

Flimm was called to get them both a piece of parchment and a quill. And while they waited, Harry checked the piles to find his gift for Marvolo among the heaps. Who would send them that many presents? Harry had only expected small tokens from the other Slytherins in his year, Ron and Hermione, and Sirius, maybe even Remus. But this many?

After a while rummaging under the tree, Harry emerged with a grin on his face. He felt eager to see if Marvolo would like his present... and anxious at the same time that it might be rejected. All in all, Harry hadn’t a lot of practice giving others things. Only since he had started at Hogwarts and only for a few selected people. Hopefully this wouldn’t ruin the day.

Best to get it over with.

Harry held the small package – wrapped in shining green metallic paper – out to Marvolo, who took it without saying anything, but with a small unsure smile, and a small nod.

He waited with bated breath, watching how careful Marvolo was in unwrapping the present. Piece by piece he took off the Spell-o-tape – Harry was sure its only difference to what the muggles used was that the sticky quality was achieved with a sticking charm – then carefully unwrapped the paper to reveal the book within.

A smirk settled on Marvolo’s face, and there was an amused glint in his ruby-red eyes. “The Art of War? An interesting choice. Thank you, Henry.”

Fidgeting a little, Harry smiled. Marvolo seemed to at least like the present a little. “It’s not that easy to find something for you. It was this or The Prince by Machiavelli.” Marvolo laughed at that, and moved his wand, causing one of the parcels to swoop up from under the tree and over to them.

It hovered before Harry, who grabbed it with care. It certainly felt like a book. It had the distinct form he was used to finding from presents Hermione gave him. It took Harry only a moment to decide that he didn’t have the patience needed to unwrap all the gifts carefully as the other had done, and simply ripped the paper off.

Marvolo snorted at that, but didn’t really comment.

Harry looked down at the title – because it indeed was a book – and smiled. That was something he really had wished to have, but hadn’t dared to tell anyone about. Charms for Sketches looked exactly like what he would need to add magic to his animal sketches. He would have loved to start reading it on the spot. “Thank you! That’s great! How... “ He wasn’t sure how to formulate his question and was rescued from his floundering by a kind smile and words.
“You talked so often about your sketching and drawing, and the fact of how you were fascinated with the animated sketches in your charms textbook… well, it won’t enable you to make sophisticated paintings, but it should be enough to animate a sketch of an animal, or a scene into a repeating loop. If you want to, you can try out some of the charms during the holidays, with my supervision, of course.”

Robbed of his ability to speak, Harry nodded enthusiastically. That sounded really good! Emotions swept through Harry, but he decided not to look at them so closely right now. He aimed another smile at Marvolo and then turned to the remaining gifts in their colourful wrappings.

Over an hour later, Harry had a long list of names written down and a heap of things stacked on a low table nearby. There had been token sweets from most of the Slytherin students – which made Harry feel slightly guilty because he hadn’t gotten everyone something as well – and a plethora of different books on self-defence spells from Daphne, Theo, Draco, and the other Slytherin fifth-years. Of course there had been a book from Hermione, but it was about Hogwarts and its founders, a collection of anecdotes and – thankfully – not one of those dry historical texts.

Sirius had given him a hand-written manuscript looking a lot like a collection of different prank potions and spells Sirius and his friends had developed – or discovered – during their own time at Hogwarts. Harry wasn’t really sure what to do with that.

There had been the knitted sweater from Mrs. Weasley. This year in Gryffindor red, which made Harry wonder if there was a hidden reprimand in the gift. The tin filled with small pieces of fruit cake looked delicious and filled Harry with happiness. It would have been really sad if the Weasleys had not sent anything, because that would have meant they were putting distance between themselves and Harry for being adopted.

The twins had sent samples from their range of products, Ginny had sent him a long letter and a bottle of red ink, throwing Harry for a loop. Surely she didn’t still have a crush on him? He would read the letter later. He really hoped that it was just a friendly letter. Because of one thing Harry was sure by now. He didn’t feel anything for Ginny. Well, not more than he would for a sister, she just was the little sister of his friend.

Many names on his list belonged to Death Eaters. Even Severus Snape had sent him a gift: a book on ingredient preparation and preservation. The card coming with the book had been signed by both the professor and his wife. It was hard to imagine Professor Severus Snape in any kind of homely scene, so Harry quickly stopped.

“I think I’ll need another bookshelf,” Harry stated taking in the stacks of books on the table.

“I’m just glad that they managed to keep to age-appropriate gifts this time,” Marvolo said rolling his eyes, startling Harry to laugh. “Get Flimm’s help to clean up that mountain of paper. And then we still have a few hours before Lord Black and Mr. Lupin will be here. How far behind are you on your homework? I’ll have to get some paperwork done, so you’ll have to entertain yourself for a while.”

Harry grinned. “I’m well ahead of my work for school. But I guess I’ll just have a look at all these gifts, and maybe start on the thank you cards… I’m sure I can avoid being bored.”

Nodding, Marvolo stood up, levitated his small stack of presents – Harry had gotten him a collection of chocolates in addition to the book – and left the room.

.:This is a fun ground:. Nagini hissed, and Harry again laughed as he saw the big snake slithering over and under the balls of crumpled paper strewn over the floor. .:Really, it feels wonderful on
Harry watched her, feeling really good. It had been at least as good a morning as his first Christmas at Hogwarts. And worlds better than any Christmas back at Privet Drive. Now only Sirius’ visit needed to work out, and all would be fine.

It was good that they didn’t need to wait until after they had eaten breakfast before they were allowed to open their presents. Last year he had been with a family who insisted on waiting until after breakfast. That had been horrible.

But now he ran, together with the others living here, still in his pyjamas to the big tree standing in the living area. There were several stacks of presents beneath the tree, one for each of them. Eager to see what Santa had brought him, Marcus fell to his knees and looked around to find his name – he had learned to read and write it since he had come here – on one of the tags.

When he finally found it – the others already ripping their presents open – his eyes got round in wonder. There were four presents with his name, not two like on most of the other stacks. Why did he get more?

The paper was different, green with small slithering snakes. And there was a card with something that looked like a knight’s crest. Really special. Marcus opened the card but the writing inside was all loopy so he couldn’t read it. He would have to ask one of the adults to read it to him.

But that wasn’t important now. With shining eyes he ripped open the first of his presents. It was a nice jumper in a green he liked, and it was so soft too! The next gift was a colouring book with plants and animals, as well as a tin box of coloured pencils. That would be fun!

But there were still two gifts to go. With eager hands Marcus grabbed a book-shaped one and moments later – paper easily shredded under his hands – he saw that his guess had been right. Quickly but carefully Marcus leafed through the pages, seeing that there were a great number of moving pictures in the book.

The last gift was a little oddly shaped, and squishy. A few tearing sounds later, Marcus held a cuddly snake soft toy in his hands. Such a great gift. But why had he gotten more than the others?

Clutching the snake to his chest, Marcus took the card and walked over to Mr. London who was sitting in an armchair drinking coffee, or something.

“Mr. London, sir?” Marcus asked carefully. He never could be sure how an adult would react at being asked something before breakfast in the morning.

“Yes, Marcus? How can I help you?” But Mr. London always was so kind, there wasn’t really that big a reason to be careful around him.

“There was a card with my gifts. I can’t read it.” Marcus held the card out to Mr. London. “Can you read it to me, sir?”

“Sure.” The man took the card and invited Marcus with a wave of his hand to take a seat on the armrest. Marcus clambered to that place, now really curious what was written in that cart with a
knight’s crest.

Once Marcus was settled Mr. London started to read. “Dear Marcus, even Though we only learned of you a few days ago, we wanted to give you something for Christmas. We don’t know what you like yet, but as you are such good friends with the snake at your school, we hope you will like the cuddly snake. Henry selected the storybook. When we meet we may look through it together. Henry and I both are happy that we found you, and hope that you will become a part of our family. And they have both signed, look here.” Mr London turned to card so Marcus could see the two places where two someones had written their names. “Henry Slytherin-Potter and Marvolo Slytherin have signed this.”

The rest of the day was filled with laughter and playing children. Marcus kept to the sidelines, colouring in his book and thinking.

He had seen quite a few kids coming and going where he had lived before. One boy had told him that Marcus should get used to the idea of never finding a family. The boy – Jeph, he had called himself – had no father, because the man had left Jeph’s mother, and because he might come back one day, no family had been willing to adopt Jeph. And because Marcus’ father was unknown, Jeph had told him it would be the same for him. No one would take him in for fear of losing him to his father, should he ever come back.

Until now it had felt just too true. But Jeph hadn’t known wizards were real, so why would what Jeph had said still be true now? Maybe Henry, the boy he had meet at the school, and Marvolo, the adult :Slithering Darkness: had sent him to get for help, were nice. It was worth a try.

Concentrating on colouring in the cat and owl, Marcus let go of his musings in favour of the fun colouring brought him. Being a wizard was great.

oooOOooo

Ron ate another of the hashbrowns his mother had made for their gathering, while listening to Bill and Charlie sharing some of the more exciting stories from their jobs. Both were ignoring the unhappy looks their mother threw them. Ron wondered if his plan to become an Auror would find more acceptance. It would be a job at the Ministry, just like Percy, but not so boring Ron would have to fight falling asleep most of the time.

It was great being home with everyone here. The food was wonderful. Ron had missed his older brothers, and even his parents a little bit. It would have been perfect if Harry could have been here.

“Why can’t Harry be here, mum? Didn’t Ron invite him?” Ginny asked with more intensity than Ron had thought his little sister had outside of Quidditch, or fighting off the twins and their pranks.

“Ron did ask him to come, my dear. But it seems with all that Heir and Lord nonsense, he doesn’t have much time. It’s sad, really. But didn’t he say he would come here for at least a day?” Their mother turned to Ron, who had stuffed another bite into his mouth just a moment before, and now flushed bright red as all faces turned to him.

When he had swallowed the bite, Ron nodded. “Yes, I asked him, and he said that he would love to come when he gets permission. He said he would floo-call, or send an owl. He gave me parcels to distribute.” Now Ron flushed even brighter. He had totally forgotten that those gifts were still in
his trunk. And under the laughter and taunts of the twins – heartily supported by both Bill and Charlie – Ron hurried up the stairs to get the lot of them. They already had unwrapped the gifts that had been stacked under the tree in one corner of the kitchen, each receiving the customary sweater they all had put on the moment they had freed them from the paper. Ron had only complied reluctantly, because his was once again a maroon colour.

Carrying the gifts both from Harry and Hermione, Ron was back in the kitchen only a short time later, dumping his load onto the table where his brothers had quickly made room for the gifts.

“Looks like Harry has made something for most of us!” one of the twins called. Ron didn’t look up as he was sorting the gifts by their name tags, so he didn’t see which one had spoken. But during that sorting he realized that his brother was right, there was a slim roll from Harry for each of them.

With quick and sure fingers, Ron removed the wrappings from the packages. Hermione had given him a book – what else – but at least it was the new book about the most successful players of the Cannons’ since their founding, and not one for keeping a study schedule or something of that kind. Another package from Hermione was filled with candies, as was one from Harry. The last thing Ron opened was the roll bound with a red ribbon. When he unfurled it, a sketch was revealed. It was a sketch like Ron could easily find in one of his many Quidditch-related books and magazines. It showed a keeper in front of the three hoops, moving to stop a quaffle that had been thrown to the left-most ring. Even when this picture wasn’t moving at all the dynamic was clear enough.

It took him a moment but then Ron realized that this was him. Him, the Gryffindor keeper, during one of the training sessions of their Quidditch team. The slight disappointment that had come up with being only given a sketch vanished. Harry had captured one of Ron’s best moments on a broom on paper. That was great!

“Look he drew me that baby dragon Hagrid hatched!” Charlie called out, holding his own sketch so that all of them could have a look at it. Ron had to nod. That dragon looked exactly like that blasted thing they had smuggled out of the school.

Fred and George held a sketch between them, beaming like loons. “He made us a design for a logo. I think it’s a blast!” Both twins looked down on their sketch, and then moved over to a corner of the table, bending over another piece of paper, which Ron assumed was a letter of some kind.

“I got a car sketch.” Their father smiled, casting a spell at the sketch, straightening out the paper that constantly had tried to roll back up.

Bill chuckled and showed his sketch of a Pyramid and sphinx without giving any comment. Their mother was holding her sketch – it looked like a bunch of flowers from where Ron was sitting – to different parts of the wall searching for a spot she might hang it after it had been placed in a frame.

Ron mused that it might work out to remove some of his earlier sketches – he would dearly love for those embarrassments to be gone – to create the space needed, when he looked over to where Ginny sat.

His sister looked down on her own sketch with a frown, before releasing her hold on the edges allowing the paper to return to a roll. Shortly after that she excused herself and went up the stairs, probably to her own room.

His only sister’s strange behaviour quickly was removed from Ron’s mind. Planning the day Harry and Hermione would be able to come over – what to eat, who else to invite – was of much greater interest. Ron looked forward to that day. Of course he would have loved to have Harry here the whole holidays, but he understood that it was important for Harry to have a family Christmas with
his godfather instead.

Since the summer, Ron had learned that he really could do without the money an old family name would bring when that meant he could avoid all the boring and tedious responsibilities coming with such names as well.

They spent the rest of the day with lots of good food, games, and stories, until Ron fell into his bed at night a smile on his face, as he knew that Harry would be over on the 27th. Harry had called via floo to ask if that would work out, and Ron had happily agreed. Soon after, he dreamed colourful dreams of professional Quidditch.

Remus looked around the cosy decorated entrance hall of Griffin House as he followed his oldest – and only remaining – friend into the house. Harry stood, beaming over his whole face, next to his guardian, clearly happy that they had accepted the invitation.

The next moment both Sirius and Harry disregarded all manners, running the few steps separating them to hug each other as if they hadn’t met just the day before at the Ball the Malfoys had hosted.

“Lord Black, Mr. Lupin, welcome to Griffin House and a happy Christmas. Please come along to the parlour. Flimm insisted that we needed a variety of cakes, so we are in dire need of help to eat it all.” Lord Slytherin greeted them with such politeness that it almost felt faked, but not. Both Sirius and Harry didn’t mind the usual way guests were escorted through the house and quickly walked down the hall, speaking animatedly. If Remus could trust his ears, they were talking about what robes had been the most boring, and which the most silly, worn to the ball of the day before.

Blue eyes met mottled green in a shared moment of fond exasperation. Before Remus could comprehend what had happened, Lord Slytherin was already walking down the hall towards the parlour where two voices could be heard. Remus followed, totally off balance. How was it even possible that he and the wizard who had killed two of his best friends felt the same about Sirius’ antics?

Bewildered, Remus followed their host only to walk in on a scene that made him smile. Both Harry and Sirius were sitting on the floor in front of the magnificent tree looking at a small mountain of presents. “See, the description says that it’s possible to create an animated picture by sketching – or painting, or whatever – a series of pictures showing parts of the movement and after that to cast the charm that will merge them. I’m sure it’s not the method used for our school texts, or the Prophet. But I’m eager to try it.” Harry’s enthusiasm was almost tangible. Remus never had seen the teenager so at ease and happy. Even at Hogwarts, the year he had been a teacher there, he had never seen him this happy.

“Henry, let’s settle down for tea. I remember Flimm stating that the cherry topped cream tartlets are best eaten warm.” This reminder was stated in a friendly tone, and once again Remus had to wonder. Was Lord Slytherin really that good an actor? Or had the man really changed that much?

“Fruit cake or one of the waffles, Remus?” Sirius asked from across the low table where he had settled next to his godson.

“A piece of fruit cake please,” Remus answered, holding out his plate to make sure that Sirius
wouldn’t drop the slice on the way.

Lord Slytherin poured the tea into four cups, letting each of them choose a cup, before adding three spoons of sugar to the one remaining cup.

A moment of quiet stretched out between them, as each sipped their tea, or took a piece of cake, and Remus was casting around in his head to find a safe topic to talk about, when Sirius spoke up.

The sarcastic tone he used made Remus fear the worst. They had talked about their wish to keep the peace so Harry would enjoy the day, but it seemed that Sirius just couldn’t keep himself under control. “Have you seen the article by Miss Skeeter, about Headmaster Dumbledore’s health problem?”

Harry looked up from his plate with a frown, quickly glancing over to where Lord Slytherin was slowly setting down his fork.

“Indeed. I read the whole paper this morning. When I have the time – which isn’t all that often, to my regret – I read at least all of the headlines.” The way Lord Slytherin carefully kept his voice level, not reacting to Sirius’ provocative demeanour, assured Remus that he was determined not to engage in an argument.

“Shouldn’t he be better by now?” Harry asked, worry evident in his voice. “I thought it was only a checkup. Are the rumours true?”

“As I don’t know any of the rumours making the rounds at Hogwarts, I can’t answer that. And I’m not sure how reliable a source Miss Skeeter is. But I know that the curse was rather dangerous, and Dumbledore took his time before he accepted my help. So I think it’s possible that he is worse off than it appeared at first.”

“I wonder how Miss Skeeter was able to gain access to such sensitive patient information. Under normal circumstances, it’s impossible for one of the staff to break the confidence of their patients,” Remus interjected in an attempt to keep the conversation civil.

The frown on Harry’s face vanished, only to be replaced with a knowing smirk, drawing the attention of all adults to the teenager. Lord Slytherin sent his ward a questioning look which clearly was understood by the teen. They knew each other better than Remus had anticipated.

With a small laugh Harry answered the unspoken question. “Hermione puzzled it out the past school year. You might all remember the unflattering articles Skeeter wrote during the tournament?” Nods all around answered him. “Well, she used things in those she had no way of knowing, if she hadn’t been listening in. As a matter of fact, she was there, listening in. Because of the fact that she’s a animagus and takes the form of a beetle, she was able to sneak past all the security. I guess that’s what she did at the hospital as well.”

Remus blinked slowly. Another unregistered animagus, just as Sirius, James, and Peter had been? How many more of those were there? Maybe it wasn’t as uncommon an achievement as widely believed.

“That would certainly explain a few things,” Lord Slytherin said with a slight smile. “I’ll have to congratulate Miss Granger on her success the next time we see her. Why is she still free, with I guess at least three then-Gryffindors in the know?”

Harry played with his tea cup, taking another sip, before he answered the question. “Because Hermione kept her captive in a jar to make sure she would stop writing such slanderous articles
about us. I guess she let her go after it was revealed that Mr. Granger’s mother was a squib.” Harry shrugged inelegantly, clearly unsure if he should have spoken about this at all.

“Why didn’t you tell Harry about the Headmaster, Lord Slytherin?” Sirius tone was biting. Was he out for trouble? Maybe the fact that they were here for Christmas, with the murderer of James and Lily as Harry’s new father, was eating more at Sirius than he had been willing to admit.

“It had slipped my mind by the time Henry came down for breakfast. I didn’t keep it from him intentionally.” There was a short non-verbal exchange between Harry and the probably former Dark Lord. “And as we don’t usually throw out the Prophet right after breakfast, he’ll be able to read the article if he wishes.”

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence broken when Harry perked up and turned so he was looking directly at Sirius. “How is the search for your daughters going, Sirius? Any news yet?”

That was enough to distract Sirius from his quest to instigate some discord between Harry and Lord Slytherin. “I sent off a private investigator to find them. I neither have the time nor enough of a clue to do it myself. But I’m in the process of writing letters to those members of the family I faintly remember from before.”

“Why can’t you just send an owl to the twins? I mean, Hedwig manages to find the people I want to reach even without me telling her where to go.”

Sirius laughed. “I contemplated that. But what if Olivienne is a muggle, and her daughters are as well? How will they react when there suddenly is an owl carrying a letter? Remus reminded me that such a thing would be a breach of the Statue of Secrecy… It would be quicker, but I can’t risk that, can I?”

“Probably not,” Harry agreed and threw a look in the direction of Lord Slytherin. The man nodded almost imperceptibly which caused Harry to grin from one ear to the other.

Of course Sirius picked that up and looked on expectantly and a little worried as Harry scooted forward on his seat, obviously eager to tell whatever was on his mind.

“You remember that festival at the school Lord Lestrange has founded this autumn?” Both Remus and Sirius nodded. “Marvolo gifted an adder to the school – for the biology classroom – and on that day the snake got into a pickle. One of the kids living there full time noticed and got Marvolo to help. His name is Marcus. And he was so happy that we could help his friend. She is named Slithering Darkness.” Harry huffed. “Sorry. I’m rambling. But I’m excited. Marcus can speak Parseltongue, so he somehow is a descendant of Slytherin. Not sure what line, but he is family… so I’ll get a little brother.”

While Sirius started to pepper Harry with questions, Remus took in the scene. Harry clearly was happy and looked forward to being a big brother, Lord Slytherin, on the other hand, gave off the impression of being uneasy. The wizard certainly was aware of the likely obstacles he would face when trying to adopt another child, and one as young as that. There was no reluctance over the fact that Marcus was to be adopted – and how could there be, another Parselmouth, not working to adopt him would cause a scandal – but some reservations seemed to be there.

“You’ll stay for dinner, won’t you? Flimm made plans for a delicious meal. He would be disappointed if you decided to go home early. And I wanted to play a game of exploding snap with you, and pull a few crackers. We have quite the selection, even a few I bought in Hogsmeade on the last weekend the students could go.” Harry managed to defuse any lingering tension with his infectious good mood.
Late in the evening after a tasty dinner, Remus and Sirius returned to Grimmauld Place dyed eye-wateringly bright green and pink. Harry had fallen off his chair as the two of them had pulled on the ends of one of the more garishly coloured crackers that had been on the table, he had laughed so hard.

Remus smiled, wishing Sirius a good night. Despite the rocky start, the evening had developed into a pleasant gathering. After this, Remus would be hard pressed to claim that Harry wasn’t happy where he was now. In the light of the happiness he had seen today, he had to forget the past and his own doubts about Lord Slytherin. Regardless of if the man still aimed for control over magical Britain or not, he obviously had managed to make Harry happy, and that was the most important part in Remus’ eyes.


oooOOooo

Tuesday, 26th of December - Boxing Day

It had taken some time – as he had expected – but now it was finally here: the first of the letters in answer to his inquiry. Asking all the schools of magic teaching in French after current and past students had felt like the most obvious thing to do.

His father would have taken the same actions. And considering that he had been a successful private investigator until his recent retirement, Sam felt following his dad’s example and asking magical schools was the best way to proceed. The structures didn’t differ all that much between worlds, and people were essentially the same everywhere. It really didn’t have that big an influence on how to proceed if he was working in the magical world or in the muggle one.

With a quick stroke of a quill he marked Beauxbatons as answered on his list, before he broke the seal – the two crossed wands each shooting three stars – and unfolded the letter.

Cher Monsieur Jacobs,

Suite à votre lettre datée du 22 dernier, je vous informe de nous n’avons pas l’habitude à répondre à ce genre de demande de renseignements concernant des mineurs, qu’ils soient ou non élèves dans notre établissement.

Cependant, je peux vous informer que la dernière Olivienne Moreau qui soit sortie diplômée de notre vénérable institution l’a été en 1785. Par conséquent, il semble plus que probable que cette dernière n’est pas la personne que vous recherchez.

En espérant que vous réussirez dans votre quête.

Lucille Dumont
Sam snorted. On the one hand he approved of the policy to give no comment on students, or minors in general, but on the other hand it would make his job harder. If the other schools had similar policies in place, he would be reduced to finding the mother. And it was a real possibility that she was a Muggle, that her children were muggles as well. He wasn’t sure what Lord Black would do in that case, but that wasn’t really his problem. He only had to find them.

Once again cursing the lack of a registration system in Britain, Sam started to write templates in several languages, to send to different offices all around Europe to ask for information on an Olivienne Moreau, born on the 10th of July in 1951. There had to be a certificate of birth somewhere.

He planned to post some small ads in newspapers all around London for information on her from back in early 1980. Then he would have set everything in motion that might bring him the information he would need to wait for, giving him some time to gather information on reasons why someone might have come to London in early 1980.

If she simply had been a tourist it would be harder, but it might be that she had been there to speak at a conference, or just attend one. Maybe she had studied in London, or one of the other reputable universities in England. There were almost endless possibilities. Sam really hoped that one of his letters would yield a result, otherwise it would get tedious pretty fast.

With a sigh he turned to his letters. Better to get them out of the way.

oooOOooo

After a morning filled with homework and the writing of thank-you-notes because he had spent the day before reading in his new books, Harry now stood – in his new colour-combined formal family robes – next to Marvolo in the reception room of Potter Manor, greeting all those many guests. Neville and his grandmother had already arrived, and several people working in high positions at the Ministry – the man who had taken over the department of International Cooperation after Barty Crouch Senior’s death, for example – Lord Lestrange and other Death Eaters… it was a daunting and tiring task.

When the Malfoy family came in, Draco smirked when he stepped up to Harry. “How are you adapting to all the new things?” The light teasing tone prompted Harry to roll his eyes at the blond. “I’m managing,” Harry answered in a deadpan tone. “At least today no one will turn up dressed like a cake.” They all had had a hard time keeping from rolling on the floor in laughter when Astoria had spotted that particular costume.

Draco snorted, subtly tugging at his sleeves to make sure his blue robes were settled correctly. “Not setting a theme helps with that, Harry. I’ll see you later.” Quickly following his parents, Draco vanished from Harry’s line of sight, and the teenager – once again with somewhat tamed hair – turned to the next family, the Notts, including Aiden who looked around with open curiosity. While Harry went through the motions of greeting a Lord and member of the Wizengamot, he cast glances around the room they were currently in. Aiden’s awe was well deserved. Flimm and his
friends had outdone themselves. Every horizontal surface was covered in fluffy, white, sparkling stuff that impersonated snow quite successfully, and that without being cold. Several places were sporting icicles, adding another bit of sparkle into the mix. The windows had been charmed to sport patterns of ice resembling flowers, and small snowdrifts were building up in the corners of the rooms. All in all, the theme throughout the rooms was winter, snow, and frost.

When the Greengrass family arrived – including the younger brother of Daphne’s father – Harry perked up. He would be allowed to go now, as Daphne was his date and it wasn’t appropriate for her to join the reception line. That only would happen if they were married, or at least engaged to be married soon.

Some rules could work in Harry’s favour. He just needed to know them all.

With a nod for Marvolo, Harry offered Daphne his arm, falling into step with the other members of her family.

“How have you managed your first few big gatherings so far, heir Slytherin-Potter?” Lord Greengrass wanted to know, keeping the conversation on safe ground.

With a smile Harry quickly composed an equally empty but polite answer, hoping fervently that he would be able to slip away soon to play host to all the teenagers who had come with their parents.

ooOoo

Marvolo watched with a small smile as Henry walked away with the oldest Greengrass girl and her family. They seemed to have formed a friendship over the few months of school since September, a fact that filled Marvolo with something resembling happiness. He felt better with Henry having a few Slytherin friends in addition to all those Gryffindors. It would help the teenager grow up with better connections and a well-rounded character.

The next group of guests quickly demanded Marvolo’s attention, and they and those that followed quickly made Marvolo realize that the fact he was standing here alone with Henry gone to be host to the younger guests, only put emphasis on the fact that he wasn’t married.

Considering he was planning to adopt another child, one so much younger than Henry had been, the expectations of the whole of their community were looming even more menacingly over him.

The looks he got from a few wizards and witches didn’t help him to feel better. He would have to make a decision soon. And he still felt torn.

The arrival of the Minister and Madame Bones gave him a reason to banish that problem into the deep recesses of his mind. Now wasn’t the time to search for a solution to that particular problem.

“Cornelius, Madame Bones! Welcome to Potter Manor!” Marvolo bowed before the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement before he turned to the Minister to shake the smiling wizard’s hand.

“Marvolo, Marvolo, this is such a nice evening for a ball like this. And I like what you have done here as decoration! But that you, dear Amelia, still insist on Marvolo calling you by your last name... why this formality?” While the Minister lamented their continued formality, Marvolo met Madame Bones’ eyes and they acknowledged the fact that even though they had fought together
against a common foe, the formidable woman didn’t deem him deserving of her trust.

“I’m sure, Cornelius, that Madame Bones and I are more than able to decide when, and if, we want to interact with each other on more familiar terms.” Marvolo could clearly see that the Minister accepted his words, but didn’t put much stock in what might be the reason for the tension between the two of them.

Not many arrived after the Minister, but Marvolo had trouble hiding a grin when Xerxes came through the floo, bringing along the mother of his heiress, only to be followed by said girl and her father. “Xerxes! Miss Granger, Doctor and Doctor Granger. Welcome to Potter Manor.” The two muggles looked splendid in their robes, and Marvolo was happy that he had agreed to invite them.

He was pretty sure Miss Granger had started the whole thing, asking Henry to offer her parents this opportunity. After carefully deliberating what the reactions might be, Marvolo had agreed. It was an attempt to help Heiress Lestrange to get more deeply involved with magical society by making it possible for her to share more of her life with her parents.

“Lord Slytherin,” Mr. Granger said, executing a perfect bow. “I want to thank you for the invitation. My wife and I are delighted to be able to experience this part of our daughter’s world with her.” They exchanged some more pleasantries and soon Marvolo could follow the others and enter the ballroom.

A few dances into the evening, Marvolo had decided on a course of action. He needed to marry for more than one reason. First to get rid of all the unwanted attention now heaped upon him by those seeking a way to advance in the world, and second to secure their – Henry’s and his – situation and claim on adopting Marcus. The second reason was much more important than the first, of course.

But as he now was pretty sure that he never would be interested in a sexual relationship with anyone – regardless of who that other was, or were – he needed to make sure to find the right person. Maybe he should try to make contact with those living up to the imposed expectations, but who secretly followed their true desires. It was possible that he might find someone – witch or wizard – who felt the same as he and would be happy to find someone to spend their life with in platonic harmony.

Of course he needed to take his time, and speak with Henry about this. It was much more important to keep their home in balance than to get matchmaking mothers off his back. There were still so many days to the new year and the end of the season of excessive gatherings. With a sigh Marvolo walked to the next group of people, bracing himself for more conversation and a few more dances.

If it hadn’t been so sad, he would have laughed over his longing for an evening in his study taking care of paperwork.

ooOoo

Outside of the manor, and outside the wards, the ground was covered in real frost and snow, branches groaning under the weight of snow and frozen water. From a perch high up in one of the sturdier oaks, Fenrir inspected what he could see of the brightly illuminated windows. The binoculars he had brought allowed him to watch the witches and wizards in their fancy robes, made for no other purpose than to boast, dance to music he wasn’t able to hear from where he was sitting. The only sounds he could make out were the wind in the plants all around, a few small
animals scurrying around, or sleeping nearby. When he suddenly heard the sound of careful steps on frozen leaves he shrunk his binoculars, placed them in his trouser pocket and started his descent back to the ground.

“Report!” Fenrir demanded in a whisper from the sentinel who had returned from his foray near Potter Manor.

“No people outside the house. Couldn’t find a breach in the wards. No way that we can get in there without making them all run.” Several low growls of displeasure followed that proclamation. Fenrir’s among them.

It had been a long shot to come here today. After their relatively successful invasion of the Bones party, it had been to be expected that the Dark Lord would not make the same errors. The fact that the weather wasn’t all that pleasant, with the wind howling now and again, only helped in not looking paranoid.

“Retreat. Get back home. I’ll inform you of our next steps,” Fenrir barked out over another gust of wind. The few wolves still loyal to him nodded their acceptance and made their way home.

Fenrir stayed a few more moments before he too took his leave. Another failure. He would need to have a success soon, or the last of his people would run away to the continent. With a mood as dark as the clouds chased over the sky by the fierce wind, Fenrir made his way home.

oooOOooo

Translation of the letter:

Dear Mr. Jacobs,

We write this letter in response to your inquiry from the 22nd of this month. It is in general our policy never to answer requests concerning minors and if they are students at our institution or not.

But we are able to inform you that the last Olivienne Moreau graduated from our esteemed institution in 1785. It seems reasonable to assume that this alumna isn’t the person you are looking for.

In the hopes that you will manage to find who you are searching for

Deputy Headmistress Lucille Dumont
A few months before Christmas I still thought it might happen that this chapter would be published on or near Christmas. Well there was snow today, so it fits at least a little ;)

I have written a short three chapter sketch of a story beginning and already published the first chapter. The “story” is called One Night Stand. I don't plan to go further than the beginning for now. First I will finish this epic of a story ;)

Take a look and tell me what you think!

Thanks to DiagonAlleyParis for the help with the French version of the letter.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published on the 30th of March 2018
Next chapter planned for 13th of April 2018
Wednesday, 27th of December

With a groan Harry stepped out of his shower to towel himself dry. Apparently standing around, walking, and dancing used muscles flying on a broom didn't, because he was stiff all over. The hot shower had helped, and it was likely that Marvolo would have a muscle relaxant potion at hand, which would take care of all the rest of the tension.

That thought stopped Harry in the door from his bath to his bedroom, momentarily dumbfounded. When had magic become so normal? Before this he would just have lived with the small aches. He had done that thousands of times after a hard day tending to the garden at Privet Drive. Living with magic constantly around him and so casually used – outside of a classroom setting – seemed to be having a slow effect on his perception of it.

As there was no function Harry needed to attend today, he slipped into one of his simpler trousers, and tossed on a sweater, and a casual robe.

A few steps brought him to the easel standing next to his desk. Harry carefully removed the cover to take a look at what he had done so far. The painting looked good, even a day later. So Harry guessed he had managed to finish it in time to give it to Marvolo on the man's birthday.

Once he had covered the painting, Harry strode from the room, a big smile on his face. Today was the day he would visit the Burrow and Ron.

As usual, Marvolo was already seated at the table, reading the paper, a cup with steaming tea standing right on top of his plate.

"Good morning!" Harry yawned. When one was host of an event, there was no way to leave early. It had been a late night.

"Good morning, Henry," Marvolo greeted with a slightly distracted tone.

"Anything interesting?" Harry sat down, smiled as a fresh cup of coffee appeared next to his plate, and started to place his favourite foods on his plate. He quickly downed the nutrition potion – hopefully he would be rid of that soon – and started to eat.

"Nothing new. But I hadn't expected anything interesting. I hope you remember that Healer Greengrass will be here after breakfast. He needs to repeat the diagnostics to see if you still need to take the nutrition potion."

Harry groaned. He had totally forgotten about that. "But that will take ages." Harry knew he was whining, but he didn't really care. He couldn't go over to the Burrow and meet with Ron when he
had to sit still and wait while the myriad of diagnostic spells was cast.

Marvolo chuckled. "The ritual wouldn't take as much time. You're the one who decided to insist on charms for the diagnostics, Henry."

Harry frowned. He remembered that conversation. A ritual that was quicker than the method currently used by the Healers in St. Mungo's. And as far as he now understood, the only reason the ritual wasn't taught anymore was because rituals were considered conspicuous. Too close to the dangerous magics that were forbidden to be used comfortably. Most patients wouldn't consent to be part of a ritual when there was another way.

Harry had taken part in a ritual for Aiden's adoption, he had been part of the ritual to check if he was a horcrux. He would be part of another one to remove Marvolo's soul fragment from him.

Would it be really that bad? And it would be quicker, making it possible for him to go over to the Weasleys' earlier.

"Can you explain the diagnostic ritual to me?" Harry didn't look in Marvolo's direction but busied himself with buttering a slice of toast. It was hard to admit – however indirectly – that he might have been wrong in the summer to reject the diagnostic ritual. And on the other hand, he couldn't have known then what he knew now.

"I'm no expert on healing magic, or healing rituals. But Malcolm surely will be happy to explain whatever you want to know." Marvolo didn't look in Harry's direction – Harry peeked to make sure – feigning interest in an article of the Daily Prophet.

Harry was grateful that Marvolo had such a good sense of situations and was willing to make it easy for Harry to change his mind. Someone like Draco, or Snape – or rather the way they had been before Harry had been adopted – would have rubbed it in. Gloating wasn't the best tactic for such a thing. Marvolo was a really good politician, something that Harry needed to learn, but at the same time the older wizard was willing to tell Harry the truth, something he really appreciated.

ooOoo

Malcolm had brought his complete healer's bag at his Lord's insistence. And now that he was explaining the ritual to his Lord's heir, he was glad that he had done so.

The boy was listening attentively and looked as if he would accept the ritual, because he wanted to cut down on the time he would need to spend here. Wishing to be with his friends seemed to be a good motivator to reassess his prejudices.

"Any more questions, heir Slytherin-Potter?" Malcolm waited patiently, watching thoughts racing behind those green eyes, hidden behind those glasses that could be superfluous if the boy just would be willing to take the potion to correct his vision.

But the Dark Lord had made it clear that his adopted son was the one in charge of decisions concerning his own body if there was no inevitable reason that action was needed. An approach which seemed to be working so far.

While the teenager vanished behind a screen to change into the white linen tunic, Malcolm started getting out his supplies, and setting up what he could before his patient was in place in the middle of the circle to be set up.

"Please lie there." Malcolm indicated the padded-table-like piece of furniture he had brought and unshrunk in the middle of the small room they were using.
The teen walked over barefooted, sat down, and then carefully maneuvered himself into a lying position, looking positively awkward.

With careful hands Malcolm removed the glasses from the teenager's nose, internally rolling his eyes that the boy still insisted on wearing them when there was such an easy way to get rid of them for good. After that he started with the ritual.

While chanting the words – sounding remarkably like old Gaelic, which he didn't speak one word of – that repeated after a few verses, Malcolm carefully took one rune stone after another and placed them on the body resting before him. One went to the middle of the forehead, one right over the heart. Another two he placed onto the hands which were turned palms up. Placing three rune stones on each leg was not as easy, as balancing them wasn't simple there. Malcolm carefully kept to the order needed, and kept pace, coordinating placing the stones with the words he was speaking.

When he moved on to placing the candles around the teenager, the boy was breathing deeply, as if in sleep. Earlier this year such a situation hardly would have been possible. The boy had been much too suspicious to relax that far in Malcolm's care.

Carefully lighting the candles placed in a circle around the table, Malcolm walked in measured steps until he reached the place where he had started, right next to a small stone table with a piece of parchment and a never-empty quill set up ready to be used.

The last step was to link the ritual with a quill and parchment to record what was about to be discovered. With a few precise gestures Malcolm did just that, and then sat down on a stool monitoring the procedure.

It wouldn't take long, but as his Master during his time training to be a healer had always said, one couldn't leave a patient unsupervised even when conducting a ritual that had been done a thousand times. There always was the chance that something unexpected might happen. Life and magic were just unpredictable like that.

While he watched the quill moving over the parchment, Malcolm contemplated that in the earliest version, the patient would have been totally unclothed, and the runes would have been drawn onto their skin with some paints created in a painstakingly complicated process. Studying the history of healing was always entertaining, and interesting at the same time. Despite his fascination for the history of his craft, Malcolm was happy that some things had changed and developed. Most patients nowadays would be much too embarrassed to get totally nude, even for their healer.

"We are finished. Please don't move while I dismantle the circle." The candles were quickly extinguished, the stones quickly gathered. It was obvious that the boy was no longer in a trance, as green eyes watched every move Malcolm made.

Once the last stone had been removed and placed back in the small velvet pouch the teenager sat up. "What's the verdict?" There was worry, curiosity, and apprehension mixed in that gaze.

"Let me have a look." Malcolm snatched up the parchment and looked at the runes scribbled onto the parchment. Learning to read those had been the hardest part of learning this ritual. "It looks like all those old breaks are doing rather well. Since we set them straight, the bones have continued to get stronger. The damage done by poor nutrition over a long time has been mostly removed as well. I think we can give up the nutrition and healing potions. But we'll have to check again in a few months, and I will give you instructions as to what you should eat. The house-elves at Hogwarts are accommodating when it comes to making sure the students get what they need."
"Is that why there are never any nuts near where Fay Dunbar sits at the Gryffindor table? She's allergic to them, as far as I know," the young man butted in, sounding curious, visibly cheered by the verdict, as he had called it.

Malcolm nodded. "It is indeed." With another glance at the parchment, he came to the conclusion that his patient was in pretty good health, all things considered. "Besides your eyesight, there's nothing else that would need addressing at this point in time. Have you any questions for me, heir Slytherin-Potter?"

Much too quickly to be believable, the boy shook his head, and scurried away to return behind the screen when Malcolm answered to that with a friendly, "If that's the case, you can dress. I'll search out your father to relay the news."

Without waiting for the boy to be finished with dressing, Malcolm packed the last things into his bag before leaving the room, closing the door behind himself with an almost inaudible click. The Dark Lord would be happy to hear that his son had agreed to the ritual and that it had shown that their efforts in healing the boy had borne fruit.

Being able to help one of his patients always left Malcolm with a content feeling of accomplishment. For once he didn't feel even a thread of dread while walking to meet with the Dark Lord.

oooOOooo

"You have your portkey? And you know when to be back?" Marvolo felt nervous for reasons he couldn't really pin down. Why ever should he be nervous about sending his son over to a day visiting with friends? Henry had been over to the Burrow more than once, had stayed part of his holidays there. They even had allowed Marvolo onto their property for Henry's birthday party. All evidence pointed to the fact that Henry would be safe with his friends.

So why was he so nervous?

"Yes, Mum," the word was heavy with sarcasm, but for some unfathomable reason, it made Marvolo's heart stutter. "I have everything and know when to be back. I'm not venturing out into the Forbidden Forest. I'm only visiting with friends."

Marvolo swallowed and applauded himself silently in his own mind for the fact that his answer came out sounding perfectly normal. "Then don't forget the presents for your hosts, and make sure to be home on time. Have fun and extend my thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Off you go!"

With a grin Henry snatched up the two presents and moved over to the floo, where he struggled a moment with the items until he had a hand free to reach for the floo powder.

ooOoo

With a bouquet of flowers, an expensive bottle of wine, and the distinct feeling of being ridiculous, Harry used the floo to go over to the Burrow.

He still was a little bemused over Marvolo's behaviour, when he stepped out of the fireplace to come to stand in the warm and cozy home of the Weasley clan.

"Harry, dear, please come in!" Mrs. Weasley bustled in from the kitchen a warm, welcoming smile on her face. "Kids! Harry's here!" She bellowed into the room, sure to alert everyone up to the attic about Harry's arrival.
Before the motherly witch could get a hold of Harry to smother him with a hug, Harry thrust the presents towards her. He had no desire to be squashed alongside a bunch of flowers and a bottle of wine. "Thank you for your hospitality. I hope your family had a nice Christmas."

"Why, thank you, Harry. We had a great time. All kids home for Christmas. It doesn't happen nearly often enough, now that Bill and Charlie are all grown up and out of the house!" She accepted both gifts and moved her nose over the bouquet, breathing deeply. "What lovely flowers! Go on up. Ron's probably still in his room, sleeping. You can go wake him."

Before Harry had a chance to react to her suggestion, Mrs. Weasley had already left for the kitchen, murmuring something about finding a vase to place the flowers in.

With a shrug Harry turned to the stairs and started to walk up their creaking length and past the rooms of the others. The twins' door was closed, a sign warning not to enter and the sounds coming from behind the door convincing Harry that he could greet the twins at a later time. The other rooms he came across were either empty, or had the doors closed, so Harry couldn't be sure if someone was inside. When he finally reached Ron's room, the snoring coming from inside made him grin. Ron obviously was taking advantage of the opportunity to sleep in over the holidays.

Quickly opening the door so it slammed into the wall covered in quidditch posters of the Chudley Cannons, Harry strode into the room with heavy steps, calling out in a cheerful tone, "Wake up, Ron. Come on, it's time to eat!"

A low unhappy growling sound came from the mound of blankets that were hiding Ron on his bed. Harry laughed and picked his way through the stuff littering the room's floor. It was a good thing house-elves cleaned the student's dormitories, otherwise there would be a lot of accidents due to students tripping over the stuff on the floor.

"Come on, Ron. I'm sure you don't want to miss out on the breakfast your mother is keeping warm in the kitchen." Harry felt a grin stretch his face, and his good humour was easily noticed in the teasing tone of his voice.

"Harry?" a bleary-eyed Ron sat up, peeking up from just beneath his blanket. "You're early."

Harry laughed. "I don't think so. Even had a healer appointment before I came here. No, you're sleeping in late."

Harry could pinpoint the moment when the realization that Harry was there had made it through the haze of sleep to Ron's mind. Suddenly his friend was awake, bolting out of bed, searching the floor for clothes.

"Did you bring a warm robe? We could go flying. I'm sure you can borrow a broom from one of my brothers. You know they're all here? It's sad that you have so many stuffy parties to go to."

With a permanent grin on his face, Harry listened to his friend prattling on while he searched for something to wear, putting the articles of clothing on as he found them. It felt almost the same as before Harry had been adopted by someone Ron couldn't stand. Maybe the rocky parts of the way were behind them.

They made their way down to the kitchen together, tossing ideas for the day back and forth, when Ginny stepped out of her room, just to stop in her tracks the moment she saw them on their way to breakfast.

"Good morning, Ginny," Harry greeted with a smile, and then frowned when the red-headed girl
turned on her heel, walked back into her room, and closed the door with some force.

Bewildered, Harry turned to his friend, who only shrugged. "Don't ask me, mate. I don't understand girls. But she's been in a tiff for some time now. No idea what happened. The last time she was this morose, the twins had sheared the hair of her favourite doll completely off. Mum magicked it back, of course, but she was plotting revenge for a while."

Seeing that his friend didn't want to discuss his sister and her strange behaviour, Harry let the topic drop.

Did Ginny still fancy him? He dearly hoped not. Even though he had noticed girls with a much greater frequency, his friend's little sister didn't make the list. She was pretty – there was no doubt about that – and he was fond of her. But more like she was his sister as well, not like he wanted to take her on a date. Cho Chang – the Ravenclaw seeker – was of greater interest to him, or even Daphne. Even though it couldn't lead to anything serious between them, she had appeared a few times in his vague and confusing dreams.

A few of those charms from the book Marvolo had given him for his birthday, and which had made its rounds through the dorm by now, really came in handy when he was woken by some of those dreams. It would be too embarrassing to get out of bed to clean himself up. Even with a room to himself.

"Harry! How nice that you could come! Let that sluggard eat, we want to show you something." The twins had come down too, looking excited, both obviously eager to talk to their silent partner.

A quick glance at Ron assured that his friend had no problem with Harry talking to Fred and George while he devoted all his attention to his breakfast of scrambled eggs, hash browns, sausages and grilled vegetables. So Harry followed the twins over to a corner of the living room where Mrs. Weasley wasn't likely to spot them and sat down.

"The logo you sketched for us is great, Harry. We've been searching for something like this for a while. Look, we made a few packaging mockups, have changed a few of our older designs. What do you think?" Pieces of cardboard, parchment, and even a few boxes were pulled from various pockets and held in Harry's direction.

The colours were glaringly bright, but as all the stuff was prank material for children, that was exactly the right choice. Soon they were deep into a discussion over what the best packagings would be, and what they needed to include in warnings on the outside. Harry laughed and soon had forgotten all about Ginny's strange behaviour.

ooOoo

On his way back from the loo and to the kitchen, where they had commandeered the table to build a card house from several decks of Exploding Snap cards, Harry suddenly found himself cornered by Ginny.

An angry-looking Ginny, her eyes sparking dangerously.

While he tried to keep a calm and friendly façade, Harry's mind was furiously going over all their interactions in recent times to find the reason for her anger. But he came up blank.

"Can I help you?" He needed to remind himself that he was capable of defending himself, but the fact that she was really good with some of the nastier hexes they had trained with in the defence club made it harder not to flee to where the others would be witnessing their discussion.
"How could you ask a Slytherin girl to those balls? You could have asked me! I would have loved to spend more time with you. Vicky and Isobel were sure you would at least invite me to the Ball at Potter Manor!" She clearly was distraught and angry, sweeping gestures only accentuating her obvious agitation. "Am I too poor for you all of a sudden? Vicky explained that you clearly had to be careful to not make my older brothers angry at you. They are very protective. And the way you dismissed Romilda made clear that younger girls aren't interesting for you. But how could you ask that Slytherin ice princess bitch?"

Well, it seemed as if those two girls – Vicky and Isobel – had fanned the flames of the crush Harry had hoped was finally dying back into a roaring flame. That was an awkward situation he now was in. He needed to make clear that Ginny probably never would be his girlfriend – or even more – but without hurting her feelings. She was still the little sister of Ron, and the twins. And despite that crush, he liked her.

"First, Daphne asked me, not I her. And I had dancing lessons with her this summer. Going through all those events with the pressure to make a good first impression on the whole society… I'm happy she's there to help me navigate all the possible pitfalls. And if she hadn't asked me, I probably would have asked Hermione." Harry took a quick breath, eager to continue to speak before Ginny could start on an even longer rant. Once she got going, it was almost impossible to stop her. "I like you, Ginny. But only like a sister, nothing more. And there is no other reason to that than the fact that I just feel for you what I feel for Hermione. Where she is like an older sister, constantly nagging at me to study more, you're like the little sister one can play quidditch with. I know neither Vicky nor Isobel, so how did you come to the conclusion that they would be able to interpret my feelings?" Ginny's face was assuming a steadily darker expression and Harry felt his heart beating faster and faster. "I hope nothing I did projected an illusion of feelings I've never held. You're a beautiful, intelligent witch, Ginny, but I would never date my sister."

Before Harry could make the situation any worse – why was speaking with furious witches not part of his training? – Ron's head poked around the corner into the corridor the two of them were standing in. "Harry, what's taking you so long? Hermione and Luna arrived just a moment ago, and we want to start building. Do you want to take part too, Ginny?"

It was a miracle to Harry that Ron hadn't heard a word of what his sister and friend had been speaking about, because Ron simply wasn't that good an actor.

Harry had just turned to answer Ron in the affirmative, when Ginny huffed and stormed away. The eyes of both boys met and with two shrugs of confusion they moved to the kitchen where Harry greeted both Hermione and Luna with warm hugs. He felt really happy about seeing Luna here so unexpectedly. She always was a refreshing presence with her unique outlook on the world.

The laughter and sounds of explosions soon filled the kitchen, while the older Weasleys were sitting over in the living room talking. It was a nice morning, and when Mrs. Weasley came into the kitchen to banish them so she could prepare lunch, they went outside to play with the snow and to fly around the trees in the orchard. Not one of them had seen even a glimpse of Ginny, and Harry was glad to be able to avoid this particular mess for a little longer.

oooOOooo

Wearing some of his best robes, Marvolo confidently walked through the Ministry, the crowds parting before him as Moses allegedly had parted the Red Sea. It was a curious thing when one of those seemingly long-forgotten titbits of muggle sayings and metaphors made a re-appearance. Was there a story in the wizarding myths that had a similar setting? Someone parting a body of water for their people? Maybe he would find an opportunity to research it… later. Because if there
was, the possibility of it really happening in some fashion would be more likely.

Smirking to himself, Marvolo shook his head. He was in a curious mood. Elated over the progress that had made Henry accept the ritual for diagnostic purposes, and nervous over the prospect of seeking the adoption of young Marcus. Xerxes had relayed that the boy rarely was seen without his snake plushie since he had received it at Christmas and that the boy often asked one of the caretakers to read him a story from his book. But it was hard to find a few hours to spend with the child in the packed schedule of the holiday season.

Reaching the door of Mrs. Wisby's office, Marvolo knocked decisively. A sunny "Come in!" was his answer. This woman was really extraordinary cheerful. In a way it was refreshing to see someone smiling so happily who was old enough to have suffered under the war he had started and remember it clearly to this day.

Pasting a smile on his face – he needed a holiday from all the festivities – Marvolo opened the door and stepped into the chaotic office. "Mrs. Wisby, hello. I hope that you can spare a moment of your time for a request I have."

"Lord Slytherin!" She quickly stood from her chair, a smile on her face, both hands extended in his direction in greeting. "How nice to see you!" Quickly a worried frown settled on her face. "There's nothing wrong with the adoption, is there?"

Sensing a long, worried rant starting, Marvolo quickly shook his head with a reassuring smile. "No, don't worry, Henry is fine and there's nothing wrong with his adoption. In fact, I'm here because we have come across another member of our scattered family whom we wish to take care of."

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And as quick as lightning the blinding smile was back on Mrs. Wisby's face. "Oh, that's wonderful! In that school that Lord Lestrange founded last autumn? I have to say I love the idea, but it caused quite a stir in the Departments having any connections to families, inheritance, and the like."

Marvolo watched, mesmerized, as the witch walked around the office, expertly dodging the many piles without so much as stirring a single piece of parchment. He briefly wondered if shifting one of the piles even a fraction of an inch to the side would be enough to trip her up.

He didn't pay all that much attention to her prattling on about the different happy stories of families coming back together, when a sudden shift in her tone and body language made him snap out of his musings. "Oh, I almost forgot. The change in procedure is so recent... We'll need to make sure the child really has the family gift, and there needs to be an evaluation that the child will be well with you..." Mrs. Wisby clearly was flustered and confused, not used to following a new procedure after long years of doing things one specific way.

"How did that come to be?" Marvolo tried for curious, but at ease. He had his suspicions that the fact he had managed to adopt Harry Potter had caused this drastic shift in policy, but didn't want to give himself away so easily.

"Adoptions weren't all that common in the past. Well, with the exception of war orphans going to close family. But with Lord Lestrange getting the magical children without proper family that lived with muggles into our community, the demand was expected to go up." She wandered over to a table to the side stacked with several books, lose parchment, and scrolls. "So the normal process came under scrutiny. And someone aware of how the muggles do things like this, pointed out that we had no methods to decide who would get custody if more than one family wanted to claim a child without as obvious a proof as a well-known family gift. Or to be sure that the family taking in the child would treat them well. I fear I'm not yet familiar with all the details." She started to pick through the paperwork on the desk, clearly in search for something specific.
It made sense to change the procedure for adoption. Memories of situations came to Marvolo's mind, scenes of yelling matches between Tobias Snape and his wife Eileen, a small boy running to hide from his father. Scenes of a small boy watching how his mother Walburga punished his bigger brother for daring to be sorted anywhere but Slytherin. Some parents didn't even manage to treat their own children with decency. Making sure a child going to a new family would be treated well seemed like the right thing to do.

In theory it was a good idea, but it was inconvenient. In fact, such measures hadn't been enacted till now because all those who might pass a measure like this thought the same. One day such rules might get in their way, so they all preferred the rules missing. The fact that someone had made sure to enact them now meant only one thing: someone had more to gain by making adoptions harder than by leaving the rules lax, ensuring fewer problems in the future if they should wish to adopt at a later time.

But who would gain from that? He would alert Xerxes, Lucius and the others to those changes. They had been enacted so quietly that they all had missed their addition. They would have to reassess their plans in light of those changes.

Only one thing was relatively certain. The Headmaster hadn't had anything to do with this. Severus' reports had indicated that the Headmaster had concentrated on getting Henry back under his influence. The old man hadn't the interest to care about other children, his past clearly showed how little the Headmaster really cared about the individual needs of his students.

There was nothing for it: he would need to go along with this new set of rules. At least in the open, his current persona wouldn't permit anything else. "Well, then I guess we'll need to figure things out together. Won't we?"

Mrs. Wisby smiled, exclaiming in joy, "There it is!" when she found what she had been searching for, and walked back over to her desk. "There are two separate things that need to be done, proving that the child you wish to adopt really is a part of your family, and passing the evaluation."

Marvolo slowly nodded and got his wand out. With a casual flick he had conjured himself a nice stool to sit on – there really wasn't enough space for anything else – and sat down so he could speak with Mrs. Wisby more comfortably. "And to whom do I need to prove that I'm a decent parent and that Marcus is a member of the Slytherin family?"

A bemused look came to her face. "I'm not sure."

Marvolo groaned inwardly. It was a good thing Henry was with his friends today. This might take a while.

oooOOooo

He had managed to gather quite the force. Not all of them were werewolves, but they all were unhappy with Lord Slytherin and the man's actions. He had hoped to wait for the next full moon, but he just knew that it would be too late by that point.

So here they were.

The silhouette of the patched-up house against the sky with the barely visible waxing moon clearly marked their target. It wasn't as close as he had wished to strike, but the Weasley family were a well known fixture in Harry Potter's life and therefore as close to Lord Slytherin as he could manage in the time he had and with the resources at his disposal.
"I'll break the wards. Stevens, take those good at offensive spells and place them around the perimeter. Keep an eye on the windows and the doors. If they try to flee or get too close to one of those, target them. No prisoners! Kill them all." He turned to the smaller group holding beater-bats, knives, and other weapons of that kind. "Make sure to attack everyone who comes close enough. Get them down, take their wands, kill them. Any more questions?"

Shuffling and shaking heads were his only answer. Fenrir nodded. "You'll see when the wards fall, or someone comes out of the house. That's the signal to start attacking. Go!"

ooOoo

Harry and Luna stood outside of the Burrow near some of the trees in the orchard, looking on an enchanting sight. Before they had gone inside for tea, they had left various fruits – dried cherries, fresh apples and pears – out there as an offering to the fairies, and it had worked. Now the air above the fruits was filled with the high pitched chattering of fairies.

Harry wasn't sure if one could call it chattering when the beings didn't actually speak, but it sure sounded the same as a conversation between humans did if you were far enough away not to be able to make out any actual words.

"Aren't they pretty?" Luna asked in a dreamy voice, rubbing her arms under her pretty but rather thin cloak.

"Yes, they make interesting patterns when they're quarrelling about which of them get to eat the cherries. It looks as if those are their favourites, don't you think?" They had made their escape when Fred and George had pulled a prank on Ginny, turning her hair and skin a glaring shade of purple.

With a frown, Harry watched Luna shiver in the cold, for a moment distracted from the colourful and lively display of the little winged creatures. "Come, we can share my cloak," he offered, already opening the fastenings. The cloak was made out of an excess amount of warm silken-velvet fabric, covered in embroidery of different kinds of leaves.

"Thank you, Harry. That's a good idea. Did you know that sharing warmth can save your life when two or more people are snowed in and have to survive in a hollow dug into a snow-drift?"

Blinking at the cheerful manner she shared this observation, Harry slung his cloak over her shoulders, placing his arm around her so the fabric would stay put. It was really nice standing so close to her. And it had been a good idea: he could feel her shivering. Hopefully now they could stay a little while longer. With the moon getting bigger, the light wasn't blinding, reflected from the snow, but cast everything in a nice glow.

They stood there in companionable silence when something caught Harry's attention. Startled, and with his hand on his wand, Harry turned his head slightly. Had there been someone? It had been too big to have been a bird, or a fairy. He suddenly felt on edge, looking around carefully. It felt a little like when Dudley and his gang had crept up on him in breaks at school.

"I think there are people walking along the edge of the wards," Luna suddenly said, without taking her eyes off the dancing fairies, her tone free of any worry. She simply was stating a fact. Sometimes her quirks baffled Harry. Hermione wouldn't have sounded as calm, she would have been intense, or would sound urgent when there was a possible threat near.

"I think we should go back inside. Warn the others," Harry stated, trying to stay as calm as Luna. If there truly was danger near, they shouldn't alert whoever was out there to the fact they had been
spotted. It would give them an advantage.

Strolling back to the house, unhurried and arm in arm, still sharing a cloak, Luna and Harry took their time. But Harry was tense, his wand in his hand, ready to cast a shield should something head their way. Even now, with the threat of Voldemort gone, his senses were screaming at him that there was danger. And it always had served him well to heed the warnings his instincts were sending him.

"Harry, Luna, there you are!" They were greeted enthusiastically by Mrs. Weasley once they had stepped into the kitchen. "Want some hot chocolate?" She was grinning at the two of them but Harry really didn't have time to puzzle out her reason for beaming at them. Harry quickly let his cloak fall onto one of the chairs, turning to see if Mr. Weasley was anywhere near.

"We've seen movement around the wards. I think there are people out there, and it doesn't feel as if they have anything good planned." Harry noticed that he was sounding slightly out of breath and maybe a tad hysterical. But he did fear that his and Luna's observation wouldn't be taken seriously.

"Now, Harry, don't be silly." Molly chided. "Are you sure it wasn't just a deer, or maybe a big bird?" Mrs. Weasley had such an indulgent tone, paired with a fond smile, that she seriously confused Harry.

"That was no animal, Mrs. Weasley," Luna said sure of herself, as all the people currently in the house came into the kitchen to hear what was being discussed.

Before the oldest witch present could say more, Bill interrupted her, gaze intent. "Can you tell how many? And where?"

Glad that for once there was an adult actually listening – Marvolo had done a good job of that too, but that wasn't true for most adults in Harry's experience – Harry turned to the curse-breaker to answer the question. "Not sure, it felt like more than three. But we were standing near the orchard, there could be more."

Suddenly the heads of Arthur, Molly, and the two eldest sons snapped up, all looking in the same direction. "Looks like you two are right," Arthur stated getting out his wand, just as the twins, Bill, Charlie, and Mrs. Weasley did the same.

"Everyone up the stairs," Mrs. Weasley directed, clearly only speaking to the younger people present. Hermione followed the instruction the moment it was given, Ron and Ginny looked ready to object, and Harry felt his own Gryffindor side rearing its head. He didn't want to go and hide like a little kid!

"The outer ward is down," Mr. Weasley stated, cold and concentrated, unlike Harry had ever seen him.

"They'll be surprised by the inner wards then," Bill said with a predatory grin that was echoed by his brother Charlie.

Suddenly the light of spells hitting a ward shone through windows of all sides of the house, reflecting off walls so they were visible in the kitchen. That spurred everyone into action.

Quickly Harry and the others were in Ginny's room, where there was a sturdy tree near the house which would allow them an escape route should they need it. Then Mrs. Weasely left again, admonishing them to "Stay here and out of the way!" before closing the door.

Harry didn't like the situation one bit, looking on the worried faces of Ginny, Luna, and Hermione,
he felt the need to do something. Anything! But at the same time he knew getting down and into the thick of things wouldn't help. The others were competent, knew more spells than Harry had learned yet, and would be distracted by his presence.

Ron had crept over to the window, carefully casting a look outside. "Looks like the wards are holding up. Bill did a good job." Suddenly a bright flash of light struck those wards just in front of the window, making Ron retreat with a muttered curse.

Looked like the window was no viable way to escape. Hopefully no one was going to set the house on fire.

Then suddenly Harry was struck by an idea. Marvolo. If he were here, they would have a much better chance to overwhelm the attackers. Harry was sure this couldn't be anyone under his adoptive father's command, but everyone willing to attack an entire family was prone to be afraid of him.

Harry gripped his wand tighter and concentrated on a happy memory. The first that came to mind was Marvolo and him sitting next to the Christmas tree unwrapping packages and animatedly speaking about what was revealed. His first proper family Christmas with his very own family. When he spoke the words his Patronus easily shot out of his wand, bounding around the room. When the stag came to a halt in front of Harry, he gave the animal a message for Marvolo, ignoring Hermione berating him for his use of magic outside of school.

"Lay off, Hermione. I think that was a pretty good idea, and no one will berate him for sending a message to get help."

Hermione huffed, annoyed. After that they all sat there, listening anxiously for any and all signs of what was happening outside.

ooOoo

For quite some time now, Marvolo had been using the techniques for meditation and Occlumency to keep calm. After Mrs. Wisby had helped him with filling in the required forms – he had done them once but bureaucracy had a tendency to make no sense and was hard to remember correctly – they had tried to determine which person or department was responsible for the assessment of the family, and the acknowledgement of the family claim. They had even gotten out the actual text of the laws governing adoptions. But the text itself was vague.

Very vague.

It only stated that the government had to make sure that children to be adopted went to close family whenever possible, and that the future guardians needed to be acceptable. Acceptable!

What an easy law to exploit. Because of the vague way the law was worded, there never was Wizengamot involvement when someone decided to change the procedure for an adoption. It was infuriating, and good to know. Maybe he could manage to get someone into a position where the way adoptions were handled came under his own influence.

But currently he was standing on the floor where most of the different divisions of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement were located, listening in while members of different divisions got into a steadily more and more heated discussion.

"I don't see why the Improper Use of Magic Office should oversee adoptions! We make sure no one misuses magic! How does adoption factor into that? The Wizengamot Administration Services
oversee all legal matters, they can make sure all proper steps are taken." The wizard speaking for
the office monitoring the trace looked smug.

"We might be responsible for court dates, hearings, and things like that, but we never had anything
to do with adoptions. That's not something the Wizengamot is ever involved in! Why should we be
bogged down with even more work?" The wizard in his ill-fitting robes gave a pointed glare to all
standing nearby. "I think the Administrative Registration Department should do this, they are the
ones keeping track of our population. They are most likely to know if some kid belongs to one
family or the other."

Marvolo rolled his eyes. If this kept up, they never would find a way to make this adoption work.
He really needed to know who had managed to sabotage all and every adoption by this ingenious
use of administrative pitfalls. The person either needed to die or be recruited. Maybe ruining their
reputation would be enough.

"Just because we have the animagus registration doesn't mean we should keep track of adoptions.
You know that most kids that are adopted either have close family in our community or none at
all…" Marvolo looked up from the red faces and angry gestures when he noticed a person stepping
into the corridor between the different divisions. Madame Bones was walking towards the
escalating discussion, a look of annoyed anger on her face. It looked like one of the Aurors
currently on duty had informed her of this… disaster.

When her accusing gaze fell onto Marvolo he held up his hands in an imitation of surrender,
shaking his head. He hadn't had anything to do with this. Well, he had asked a question, but that
had been all. "I just asked who was conducting the new steps needed in an adoption process. How
was I to know that it isn't clear whose job it is?" Marvolo shrugged and kept a smile off his face at
the annoyed sigh the formidable witch gave to that.

Before she could start sorting everything out, everyone's attention was drawn by the silvery shine
of a patronus breaking through the far wall, heading in their direction.

"That's Henry's patronus." Marvolo murmured suddenly feeling as if he was about to go into battle.
The stag came to a skittish halt in front of Marvolo and his son's voice hastily spoke. "There are
wizards attacking the Burrow. Mr. Weasley and four of his sons are fending them off, but there are
more than five. I'm pretty sure. We need help." Then the patronus faded from view, its message
delivered.

Madame Bones took action on the spot, ordering the Aurors on duty to prepare to defend the House
of Arthur Weasley and his family against an unknown number of attackers before turning towards
Marvolo where he stood his thoughts whirling. "I guess I can't make you stay behind?" He shook
his head. "You can apparate there yourself?" Marvolo managed a nod "Good. I hope there will be
no problems regarding chain of command?" There was a challenge in her voice and despite the
situation Marvolo felt his lips quirk into a tiny smirk.

"Your people, so you're in charge. If it's all right with you, I'll make sure my son his safe, and
support where necessary." He felt a strong desire to call his own people for help, but he had seen
that the Aurors were competent, and the only way to call for his Death Eaters was nothing he could
do in public.

Without any more unnecessary words, the group departed for the Burrow, all of them ready to step
onto a battlefield with an unknown number of hostile magicals attacking a house with children.
The moment Marvolo landed a few paces away from the wardline around the Burrow – seeing spellfire flying towards the oddly shaped house, just hearing the shout of "Ministry lackeys!" from somewhere – he knew he was out of his depth. He preferred responding to reacting to a situation, and he simply never had made plans for a situation close to this. Attacking houses, defending a place against attacks from outside, open battle. All of that was pretty clear in his head. But he had never had need of plans for how to defend a structure from the outside while it was under attack. He always had been able to call his people to the inside of each building that he might have to defend. And he never would have come to the defence of others in the past. He would have to make a plan.

Later.

At the moment, Madame Bones was sending Aurors after the figures running away, and Marvolo made the decision to follow her commands.

A first.

There had never been a battle he had taken part in where he had not been the one in charge.

"Dawlish, Tonks, Slytherin," Madame Bones called out, and once she had the attention of all of them, motioned for them to move around the house clockwise, taking out all possible threats they might encounter. Then she waved to the remaining Aurors to come with her and walk counterclockwise around the house to do the same.

With quick gestures Marvolo and his two Aurors – well, one was truly his, and the other a loan from Madame Bones – agreed on an order to walk in and started to search out their opponents stalking off into the darkness. Snow, half melted and then frozen again in some spots, crunched under Marvolo's boots, but a quick spell took care of that possible give away. With a frown, straining to hear and spot the possible dangers, Marvolo cast a flurry of other silent spells. After that neither he nor his clothes caused any sound, nor was he any longer detectable by scent. Even if the myth that a werewolf's senses were better than a human's were untrue, there were charms and potions as well as rituals to enhance one's senses if one desired.

Breaking glass made Marvolo turn towards the house just in time to see a burning piece of something being thrown through a window in one of the upper floors. Forcefully reminding himself that the children – his son! – weren't alone in the house, Marvolo cast one very strong and silent stunner at a pathetic, cowering figure holding a beaters-bat, felling what seemed to be a man. Adhering to Ministry protocol, a binding spell followed, before he moved on. There was no time to secure any of them further, but as they worked around a circle from one point in opposing directions, it was pretty sure they would manage to subdue all threats.

Suddenly Auror Tonks was thrown into his way, landing with a loud thump, air rushing out of her lungs. Marvolo automatically turned in the direction she had come from, falling into a defensive stance over the fallen witch.

"You!" a big figure snarled, taking the last step to be fully illuminated by the thin crescent moon.

"Fenrir," Marvolo said without inflection. He hadn't thought they would meet. What a pity that he had two witnesses here. He would need to capture the mangy wolf alive, and limit himself to spells actually approved by the Ministry.

And then with a flick of his wrist Marvolo started to send a barrage of spells at the thorn in his side. Cutting curses, stunners, joke hexes like the jelly-legs curse, one after the other as fast as he could manage. It was fast enough that all Fenrir could do was dodge, cast shields, and try to avoid
being hit. As much as Marvolo liked duelling with Severus, Lucius, or Augustus for the skill those three posed, this absolute dominance fighting against a single wizard of inferior skill had its own charm.

And then a stunner flew past Marvolo's hip, connecting with Fenrir's chest, toppling the werewolf unceremoniously onto his back.

"Bastard," the female Auror snarled, and reminded Marvolo fiercely of her late aunt Bellatrix in just that moment. Wrapping the wolf in thick silver chains, Marvolo chose to not comment on his observation.

Before they could resume their chase, Madame Bones and her Auror escort came into view.

Full of worry for his son, Marvolo broke rank without much thought, striding in a not-quite-run towards the house. He just had to check on his son. He had to! There was no way in the world he would be able to wait.

He reached the door to the house just when a wizard stepped out of the building, wand raised and at the ready.

"All is clear!" Marvolo called, holding his own wand in a way that was usually a sign of a peace offering, because it was almost impossible to start any serious, dangerous spell aiming at the one standing in front of that way.

"Lord Slytherin." Marvolo recognized the voice as the one of the curse-breaker Weasley – William, the oldest – and tried not to be offended by the suspicious tone. "How come you are here?"

"Henry sent a Patronus to call for help. I was at the Ministry. Madame Bones heard the message and accompanied me with a few Aurors that had been on duty. I hope all is well?" It was funny how dropping the name of his son made the tension almost vanish. But he guessed the truth in this case was a rather good explanation for his appearance here.

"They broke a few windows, hoping to get us to run outside, I guess. But it feels as if they were ill-prepared." Charlie Weasley – the one working with the dragons – said before turning to his older brother. "Come on, let's check the ward line." So the two brothers wandered off.

Madame Bones suddenly spoke from behind Marvolo, and only long training helped him not spin on the spot, cursing her. "May we come in, Arthur?"

"Yes, yes! Of course! Come in!" the head of the household exclaimed, appearing quite flustered, with his reddened cheeks and mussed-up hair.

And so they filed into the kitchen, while cracks in the garden spoke of prisoners being taken away to holding cells at the Ministry.

Marvolo was just about to turn around to take part in the debriefing after this short battle, when a considerable weight collided with him. "I was so worried! Saw that fight you were in! Are you injured? Thank you for coming!"

A weight fell from Marvolo's chest as he closed his own arms around his son, who had him encompassed in another of the boy's crushing hugs. He would have to do something to get one that didn't happen in the wake of some dangerous situation. They felt nice enough to go to some trouble to figure out what other circumstances might tempt Henry to grant them.
"I'm fine. Really I am. He wasn't really a challenge. Even as a somewhat useful duellist, Fenrir mostly relies on fear and intimidation to win. And we were three against one. He didn't stand a chance." He could go into more detail of why he had been sure to win, but didn't feel it necessary to do so just now.

In fact he felt quite content, standing in the kitchen wrapped in the arms of his son, his head resting on his son's head – and that wouldn't be possible for much longer – only listening in to the debriefing taking place around them.

Madame Bones recounted the number of assailants they had managed to subdue, stated the fact that there had been a hag among them, as well as several werewolves from the list of those deemed dangerous, and a few known criminals.

Marvolo's eyes met with those of Madame Bones across the kitchen filled with redheads, and he watched her features soften for a moment, watching him embrace his son, before she turned to accept a cup of tea from Mrs. Weasley.

What strange turns his life had taken since he had regained a body. And somehow it felt as if the strangeness wasn't about to stop anytime soon.

Chapter End Notes

That got longer than I had planned, so a few things will have to wait for the next chapter. Someone brought up Amelia Bones as a potential partner for Marvolo, and even though I feel it would be really hard to get them together, I find myself curious how that would work out. No idea if it will happen here (haven't really planned who Marvolo might find as a platonic partner for a marriage) but I find myself plotting possible ways to explore this idea.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Wednesday, 27th of December

It had taken some time to get everything sorted. The kids had all gotten a mug of hot chocolate with cinnamon after Lord Slytherin and all the Aurors had gone and now were up in their rooms. Molly had said for them to sleep, but she was pretty sure they were doing anything but.

Next to the kitchen she could hear Bill and his girlfriend talking in a mixture of rapid French and broken English. The French witch had been with her parents but had insisted on coming through the floo the moment Bill had called her so she wouldn’t hear about the attack through the papers in the morning.

Maybe she was worthy of her son after all. Even if she clearly had no concept of how to keep a house in good shape, or how to cook… With a sigh Molly walked over to the stove to fill another two mugs with hot chocolate.

Arthur came back into the kitchen, putting his wand away. “All the windows are whole again. And I set a few monitoring spells all around the border of the house. Should anyone decide to come back, a chime should alert everyone the moment they step anywhere near the house.”

With a sigh clearly speaking of how tired he was, Arthur settled down in one of the chairs at the kitchen table, accepting the mug Molly floated over to him with a smile. “Thank you, love. That’s just what I need now.”

Storing her own wand in her apron pocket, Molly sat down next to her husband, sipping on her own hot chocolate. “Do you think those were the last of the rough werewolves? I surely hope they were. But with Fenrir among them it’s likely, isn’t it?” She slumped a little to sit more comfortably in her chair, and tangled her fingers with Arthur’s when he extended his hand in her direction.

“Amelia seems convinced that they were the last of them. I agree with her assessment that this had too much desperation in it to be anything other than a last-ditch effort.” He smiled at her, squeezing her fingers and taking a good swallow from his hot drink.

For a moment they sat there in silence. Only the low talking from the room next door, the creaking of the boards in the upper floors where their younger children obviously weren’t asleep yet, and the sounds of the wind blowing around the house and through the garden could be heard.

“It was startling to see… Lord Slytherin so obviously relieved that Harry wasn’t harmed,” Molly murmured once she had finished her chocolate. She still hadn’t really processed that bit of information the evening had brought. It probably would take a few days until she felt at ease again.
in her own home. Luckily the children wouldn’t have to return to Hogwarts right away. Molly wasn’t sure she could let them go right now, not after the attack of this evening.

“Do you think he’s aware of how that embrace looked?” Arthur asked, sounding pensive.

“You think it could be a front?” Molly asked, suddenly alarmed. It would certainly be much more like that man to pretend than to actually care for the boy whose parents he had murdered.

For a moment there the world that had been so out of alignment fit again into the well known shape it had been in for many years. The man that had caused the death of her beloved brothers just pretending to care for the boy she felt was another of her sons... but then Arthur shook his head.

“No. Maybe Lord Slytherin can act that good, but can you see Harry doing the same? I think it’s pretty clear by now that the man has truly changed. Maybe Albus was right and everyone can find redemption.”

Molly didn’t comment on that. Maybe it really was true, all those stories about a curse affecting a young man whose curiosity for all magic got him into a lot of trouble. And maybe he truly had tried to start over. Maybe she could be civil for Harry’s sake. But as her brothers would never get a second chance, she wasn’t sure that it ever would be more than forced civility.

oooOOooo

They had apparated home to Griffin House right from the edge of the Weasleys' property, and into the room reserved for travel into the house. Under normal circumstances Marvolo avoided bending the wards to make this possible, but today he truly wasn’t willing to take any chances, or stay outdoors longer than necessary.

Henry stumbled a little as they landed. “Everything well, Henry?” His son had looked unharmed, but one never knew what shock could do to a system.

“Yeah, I think I’m fine,” the boy answered, taking a shaky step and raising his hands to open his cloak.

Before either of them could decide what to do next – but going to bed probably was high on the list of possibilities – Nagini slithered through the door.

::You two were gone long. Why didn’t you take me with you?:. The snake sounded put out over the fact she had spent the whole day by herself.

::I spent the day at the Ministry, you would have been bored, and cold:. Marvolo hissed in answer, starting to get rid of his own cloak and warm winter accessories. Regardless of what he did, Nagini always found a reason to complain.

::I smell blood:. Nagini stated, starting to move her body to reach higher into the air, swaying her head back and forth as if in search of the source of the smell.

With a quick flick of his hand Marvolo had his pale wand in hand, casting a diagnostic charm at Henry. But it came back green. The boy hadn’t sustained any injuries.

::What happened to your sleeve?:. Henry wanted to know, pointing at the left sleeve of
Marvolo’s robe where, clear as day, there was a tear in the fabric.

.:Must have caught it on a branch or something:. Marvolo noted, putting his wand back into the holster so he could get out of his robes.

.:Nagini smells blood, so the branch probably injured you. We should call the healer:. Henry’s hisses turned a bit frantic and so Marvolo didn’t object, but simply nodded. Henry had been good about staying out of the fight. There was no real harm in calling Malcolm in to have a look at a scratch. When he was here he could check Henry for symptoms of shock as well.

“As you wish. But then he will have a look at you too. Sit down in the parlour, order some hot chocolate for me and whatever you wish for you. After you managed to stay out of the fight, you have earned a treat.”

Henry rolled his eyes annoyed at the teasing tone, but did as he was told. Nagini followed him, hissing all the while that she very much would like a fire burning in the grate.

With a smile on his face, Marvolo walked to the study to use the snake ornament there to summon their healer.

oooOOooo

_Thursday, 28th of December_

.:I don’t want to stay behind:. Nagini hissed for the fifth or sixth time since Harry had come down the stairs. She kept slithering into Marvolo’s way while the man dressed to go out.

.:You are too big, Nagini. The children will be scared of a snake as big as you are:. Harry never had heard Marvolo explaining something with that much patience to his familiar before. Most of the time Nagini tired of the game pretty quickly, but not today.

Today they were going to visit the school and eat breakfast with Marcus. Nagini wanted to be with them, because she obviously thought that she was part of the family. And Harry thought that she was right.

“Is there a way to shrink her? Professor Snape did shrink Neville’s toad, Trevor, back into a tadpole, once. She wouldn’t be that scary if she would be small enough to curl up in your hand.” Harry said, folding his scarf so it wouldn’t bunch up uncomfortably under his cloak.

Marvolo hummed and then stopped before stepping on Nagini. With a sigh he got out his wand. .:You can come if you let me shrink you:. Nagini swayed a few moments on her spot flicking her tongue out again and again. .:I want to come:. A wave of Marvolo’s wand and a hissed incantation later and Nagini was shrunk to a much more manageable size. Marvolo swooped down to pick the small snake up. .:No complaining that everything is so big now:. 
Nagini gave a wordless hiss of assent and Harry laughed. He was terribly nervous, but there was no way he would allow that nervousness to show. Marcus was the one important now. They could give him a family, and Harry truly wanted to do that. With Mrs. Goyle, he had realized that the Dursleys should have been a true family for him. That they were the one at fault for the strain that always had been present in the house. As far as Harry knew, Marcus had never been called a freak, but he had never had a real family, either. Always living in foster families couldn’t be good in the long run.

Anyway, they would do their best to get Marcus into their family, and Harry would do his best to be a good big brother.

ooOoo

Xerxes had expected his Lord at the edge of the wards. And the moment he and his son apparated in, he gave the man the smallest bow he could under the present circumstances. It had been getting steadily more normal to interact with the Dark Lord as an equal. The number of meetings where only the Dark Lord’s followers were present had sunk to under one in a month, but the high number of social functions the month of December had brought had provided ample opportunity to interact where the whole community was watching.

It was only reasonable to expect these changes.

“Good morning, Marvolo. I’ve heard about the capture of Fenrir. It made the front page of the Prophet. I’m glad that no one was injured and that this dangerous man is no longer free.” Xerxes smiled, it was so good to see these two wizards so at ease with each other.

“Good morning, Xerxes. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to meet with Marcus.” The Dark Lord inclined his head with a smile, guiding his adopted son with a hand on the teenager’s shoulder.

“It’s no problem. I’m happy that Marcus will have a family in you and your son.” And Xerxes was happy. The school was working out better than he had hoped. There were a few squibs that had been hidden away now getting an education, and many children from old-fashioned families following his Lord were now able to make friends and learn together with other children, where before they had been alone, tutored at home, almost without contact with others their age.

“I learned yesterday that the procedures for adoptions have been changed. It seemed all rather disorganized to me. I think you should look into the changes. Let me know if I can be of assistance.” Marvolo had sounded rather nonchalant, but Xerxes recognized an order when it was given. What he found more intriguing was the look his Lord’s son gave the two of them. It was almost as if the boy had also heard and understood the order. Xerxes remembered at least one time that his Lord had reached into a robe pocket during a meeting to take out what looked like a mirror, after which he left the room while hissing in a way that had to be parseltongue.

Hermione had mentioned that her friend talked with his adoptive father and his godfather every single day. Had that been one of those talks? Did the boy know that the Death Eaters still existed? It would be an interesting conundrum.

With a small bow Xerxes turned to go to his office, he had a Ministry problem to research. Marvolo and Henry stepped into the building where the kitchens and the dinner hall where located.
Lord Lestrange talking about the capture of Fenrir the previous night had brought the happenings back into Harry’s mind. He was truly glad that the werewolf who had infected Remus, and so many others, had finally been caught. And now he was curious what would happen. Would there be another emergency meeting for the whole Wizengamot? Or would the man be kept in custody until the next regular one?

While he walked next to Marvolo through the hall serving as a somewhat overly large dining room, Harry decided that there was no harm in asking. “Will there be another emergency meeting of the Wizengamot, now that Fenrir has been caught?”

With a surprised huff Marvolo turned his head a little so he could answer speaking quietly. “There isn’t any need for a meeting. Fenrir has been sentenced to death for being a rabid werewolf for years. At least well over a decade by now. I expect that the execution will take place in a few days at the latest.”

Harry was a little surprised by the calm and unemotional delivery of this news. After all, Fenrir had been an ally to the Death Eaters in the last war, and Marvolo had acted as if he cared for those of his old followers who had been captured and thrown into prison. Maybe that right there was the difference. The Death Eaters were special cases, bound by something close to what had been oaths of fealty in the past. Fenrir only ever had been an ally – at most – and had never shown any attempts to adjust his behaviour to the changes in the way Marvolo was going about reaching his goals now.

When they neared a table where Marcus and an adult were sitting, all thoughts about Fenrir and his likely fate vanished from Harry’s mind. They were here to get to know Marcus, and for him to get to know them better. Harry remembered only too well how frightening it had been to be adopted by Marvolo. Even if Marcus didn’t know anything about who Marvolo had been, it would be easier for him to adjust if they knew each other before they became a family.

“Good morning, Lord Slytherin. Heir Slytherin-Potter,” the adult man greeted them, waving his hand at the two empty chairs at the table. “Have a seat. I think Marcus and you have already met once?”

“Yeah, we have.” Harry sat with a smile, smoothing his robes down as he sat. “Marcus came to us for help when the school snake was in trouble.” Harry smiled what he hoped was a sincere and reassuring smile. “How is she?”

The caution vanished from Marcus’ face and he started to talk a mile a minute, clearly excited. “She’s fine! Yesterday she told me that she really likes the brown mice more than the white ones. Says the white ones aren’t fat enough. I told her you would be here today, and .:Slithering Darkness:. wanted me to get you both over to her box because she wants to talk with you too! Can we go over after we have finished with breakfast? Mr. London says we have to eat something first. What do you like more, waffles or pancakes?”

Harry was taken off guard by the sudden expectant pause in the flow of words, and judging by the slightly dazed look on Marvolo’s face the other wasn’t faring any better. Mr. London – if that truly was his name – had an amused look on his face, so this seemed to be pretty normal.
Before the situation could turn really awkward Nagini slid out of the sleeve of Marvolo’s robes where she had been hiding, curiously flicking her tongue out to scent the room. :Are you the young one my human said we would meet today?: her much smaller head turned so she could slither her way over the table to where Marcus was sitting.

.:Who are you? And what is your name? I have a snake friend who lives in the science classroom. Where do you live?:. Marcus clearly had no fear interacting with an unknown snake. Harry thought Marcus might not have had any bad experiences with snakes before.

.:I go where my human goes. That’s the big one who carried me through the cold. The young one is my human’s child. I like him too. And I think I might like you as well:. Nagini slithered the rest of the way, right across the plate that still was empty, onto the small hand Marcus held towards her.

“I like both waffles and pancakes,” Harry answered one of the earlier questions, starting to fill his own plate with a variety of the offered foods.

“And I like to eat something different every morning. Today I would like a bowl of porridge with apple slices, honey, and nuts.” Marvolo picked up the line of conversation, doing as he had said in filling a bowl with porridge and then adding all the other ingredients from smaller bowls sitting around the table.

Nagini slithered from Marcus’ hand up his arm and around his neck, so she could rest comfortably on his small shoulders. Harry was sure that Marvolo’s familiar was heavier than Marcus in her normal state.

“I would like a roll with chocolate spread, please,” Marcus said, pointing at the jar in question. Without further prompting Marvolo wandlessly levitated a bread roll from a small intricately woven basket, then sliced it with a swift movement of his wand right over Marcus’ plate. A few more gestures had the chocolate spread evenly distributed on both halves of the roll, an eagerly watching Marcus happily clapping his hands. “That was neat!”

“Thank you.” Marvolo accepted the enthusiastic praise with a smile and a regal nod, making Harry fight hard to not snort and embarrass himself.

For a moment they ate in silence, Nagini slithering all around Marcus, his plate, and the food near him. She clearly was happy that she had managed to come along.

Harry spotted the small snake plushie peeking from a spot on the chair right behind Marcus. “Do you like snakes? Do you have other animals you like?” Harry asked, intend to show his interest in what Marcus liked and disliked. No one had ever asked him what he liked before he had come to Hogwarts. He felt it was important to show Marcus that he cared about stuff like that.

“I like snakes a lot!” Marcus exclaimed his eyes shining. “No other animals can talk!” The conviction on his tone made clear that this was a pretty important part of why he liked snakes. “But cats are nice too. They are so soft, and can run around and jump really high! But I don’t like bees and mosquitoes, the stings hurt!”

And so it went on. They traded their favourite colours, foods, games, and then switched to things they didn’t like. Harry listed a few vegetables he didn’t really like all that much, but he was aware that there was little food he wouldn’t eat, unlike Marcus who had strong opinions about all kinds of food, some were too green, or too crisp, or too mushy.
At the end they went over to the science classroom to introduce Nagini to the common adder living there before they said goodbye, promising to be visiting again soon.

“I feel that went well,” Marvolo commented on their way back to the edge of the wards.

“He really doesn’t like lots of foods,” Harry remarked. That was something that stuck in his head. Maybe because he never really got to choose what to eat, always happy to get something when he was allowed to eat? Then it should be a good sign that Marcus was this picky. Right?

“It’s good he can choose then, isn’t it?” Marvolo answered, and while taking a hold of the offered arm Harry realised that Marvolo shared his slight – not really confusion – amazement over this. But considering that Marvolo had grown up in an orphanage where everything had always been in short supply that was not really so unlikely.

Bracing for the unpleasantness that was apparition, Harry turned his attention to the gathering they were to attend this evening at Longbottom Manor.

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It had taken the medi-witches a lot of work to get the needed potions into their patient. But now they could finally conduct another cleansing ritual for Mr. Dumbledore. Jeremy would have loved to conduct this ritual on the 21st, but it had not been possible as they hadn’t known it was even needed. So now was better than never, he would say.

After the repeat test had revealed the more severe condition, they had had the leverage to take more serious measures. Measures such as forcing Mr. Dumbledore to take the needed potions, banning his leaving his room on his own, or at all, among other things.

This ritual they were conducting today would determine the chances the old man had at recovering.

“Be certain to not stray from the steps. And take care to execute them in synchrony.” Jeremy looked around the group of healers gathered around. This ritual was a complicated one, several people had to work in concert to make the magic take the right course.

Two strong medi-wizards came in carrying a stretcher with a sedated Mr. Dumbledore into the circular stone room. Minimizing the influence of external magic was important, but it made the use of rather unorthodox methods necessary.

After their patient – clothed only in linen robes – had been placed on the specially prepared place in the middle of the circle permanently etched into the floor, Jeremy checked one last time that everything had been prepared to his specifications.

Even with the order from his Lord to do his very best, he wasn’t sure this would work out in favour of his patient. They didn’t often get to use this ritual, and practising wasn’t something they got to do without a patient.

On his signal, he and the other six participants in this ritual started to move and chant, creating an interesting effect with their voices sounding as one, rebounding off the stone surfaces where their shadows were cast by several candles, and seven small fires burning in cauldrons danced to the music.
This went on for some time, then the tempo of their steps and chanting changed, and they drew in the bundle of herbs they had been holding when passing their evenly spaced cauldrons. Magic coursed through the room, around them all and into their patient. If they managed to keep up their harmony for the next two hours, the old Headmaster might get better after all.

The gathering at Longbottom Manor traditionally was one of the last of the year, and in the last few decades, one with mostly light-allied families invited to come. The Malfoys, for instance, had made a point of not attending, even when they were invited, for quite some time now. In fact, the gathering had lost a lot of its pull in the years since the last Lord had died.

This year Augusta noted with some grim satisfaction the number of people who had agreed to come had grown significantly from last year. She was pretty sure she knew the reason for that change.

Being declared regent for the Potter seat on the Wizengamot had given her a lot more influence. Suddenly everyone wanted her ear, so they might manage to exert some influence over how Harry Potter, the-boy-who-lived, developed his political stance. It was disgusting, but at the same time all too familiar.

She stood in the entrance hall greeting their guests with Neville standing at her side, fulfilling his duties to a standard he hadn’t managed in the past. Maybe he finally was growing out of his insecurities.

“Good evening, Minister! How unusual for you to find the time to be here!” Augusta gave her best fake smile and a small bow, which tilted the fox sitting on her pointed hat for the evening forward as if it was about to jump onto the Minister’s bowler hat.

“With Fenrir and his last supporters finally apprehended, I thought it only right to take the time to celebrate with some of my dearest friends.” Cornelius’ smile was oily, and his excuse as flimsy as any in all the other years, with the only difference being that now he was giving one for the reason he was here and not for staying away.

“That was good thinking on young Harry’s part to send a Patronus with a message to Lord Slytherin,” Augusta said with a smile and a nod that implied her agreement, but the stiffening of Cornelius’ posture made it all too clear he had understood her dig at his so-called success. If not for Harry’s Patronus, Fenrir might have managed to escape again.

“He is a bright young wizard,” Cornelius agreed with a strained smile. It had to be hard admitting – if only indirectly – that he had been wrong about Harry and his warning of Voldemort’s resurrection. It had been swept under the rug quite thoroughly, but as it hadn’t been going on long before Lord Slytherin had come back to start over, Augusta really wasn’t surprised. No one reached the position of Minister of Magic without a shred of political talent. Not even if that person was in the pocket of someone as wealthy as Lucius Malfoy.

“Have a nice evening, Minister,” Augusta said, not waiting for him to thank her before she turned to the next guests arriving, a slight to Cornelius’ pride but still perfectly polite.

Xerxes Lestrange walked towards her, a smile on his face and his heiress – the Gryffindor girl from
Neville’s year – with Nott’s boy on her arm in his wake. “Xerxes, welcome! How are things at your school?” They knew each other from their school days and had respected each other most of the time. The fact his sons had died in that fire over in France, and that he had taken a muggle-raised girl as his heiress, had smoothed out a few of the grievances between them. His founding a school dedicated to the education of all children connected to the magical world – Squibs included – had added to her willingness to give him another chance.

“All is going well. The Yule festival was a big success. The teachers are contemplating to hold another one in the summer.” They chatted for a while and finally came to the capture of Fenrir. It was a theme that came up again and again throughout the whole evening. Augusta felt it was so much gossip, but as the man had wreaked so much havoc, it felt like she could not really fault her guests for being eager to talk about the events of the night before.

It would be a long evening with a mix of guests she hadn’t had in her home for a long time. With a small internal sigh she straightened her posture and started on her first round of the ballroom.

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They had managed to get out of the mandatory socializing in the stifling company of all the adults who had come to this ball rather fast. So now they all were gathered in a nice parlour a little away from the big ballroom, sitting on the couches with their drinks, chatting.

Harry was sitting with Neville and Theo at one of the tables playing a game of exploding snap. The girls – Susan, Hermione, and the Greengrass sisters – sitting over near the fireplace were talking animatedly. Judging by some words floating over to their game of cards, Harry guessed they were talking about career options and OWL preparation.

There were groups of older and younger children – or maybe teenagers for the older kids – at other tables, each sticking to those they knew the best. The adults might use these events to make new connections for their political gain, but the children forced to be here as well used every opportunity to just talk with friends.

All in all, it was a little odd. Harry had been invited to the Burrow, of course, and he had spent time with the others from Gryffindor and Slytherin in their respective common rooms, but this, this was alike and different at the same time.

Maybe the closest he could come was comparing it to Draco’s birthday party from the past summer. But then again, now he was friends, or at least friendly acquaintances, with the people present here, so it was different again.

“Say, Neville. I heard that there are great greenhouses here at Longbottom Manor. Do you think we could get a visit in? Father insisted that I study when there’s no event I have to attend, so I didn’t get many opportunities to go out,” Theo said as he had to take another card.

Neville blushed a little, nodding. “We do have good greenhouses. And if everyone is in agreement I don’t know a reason why we shouldn’t go.” Then he placed a card on the pile, causing the cards to explode quite spectacularly.

“Say, Harry, how are things moving with the adoption?” Astoria suddenly asked, rolling her eyes. Maybe she didn’t approve of them playing a game that some deemed pretty childish.
“What adoption? Is there something going on with your adoption?” Susan asked curious, turning her attention totally on Harry. It looked like only those closely associated with Marvolo – or rather his close political allies – knew about Marcus. The fact that Susan seemed oblivious spoke quite clearly about how her aunt was handling information from work.

“No, everything is all right. But, well, we have found another Parselmouth.” Harry gave Astoria a look, hoping to get the message across that they hadn’t wanted to let the information spread just yet. But the girl ignored him, turning to Susan.

“Harry is to be a big brother. I think it’s great!” Astoria was almost bouncing in her seat, and Harry shook his head in exasperation, so much for keeping it under wraps.

With an exasperated sigh, Harry turned back to the game. “I guess after the time father spent at the Ministry yesterday trying to sort out that mess the adoption process has become, it will not take long until it's all over the papers.” That comment got nods from everyone, the tendency of the Daily Prophet reporting on Harry’s life was well known after the spectacle of the last year.

“The little boy from the festival,” Hermione stated, smiling.

“Marcus. I hope it won’t take too long until he can come live with us. How is Aiden doing, Theo?” Harry really wasn’t keen to speak about his family, so deflecting the conversation to another topic hopefully would work.

“Oh, he loved our tree and the fairies. And he really likes the school. Being a big brother is an adjustment, though. Aiden constantly wants to spend time with me, even when I do something really boring. While working on our Transfiguration homework Aiden was constantly asking questions. I’m sure you’ll have the same trouble soon.” Theo laughed and the others did as well. That was until Daphne said, “I hear you.”

“Hey!” Astoria exclaimed in not-quite-mock-outrage, flinging a cushion at her sister.

A short pillow fight followed which quickly involved everyone, until Neville called them all to order, suggesting that they move over to the greenhouses and take a walk through the garden.

The house-elf had quickly fetched their cloaks for them and they marched out into the cold, chattering on about school work.

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Strolling through the fringes of the gathering, Marvolo spotted Severus standing together with his wife in a little alcove-like niche with a window and curtains. Maybe he should use the opportunity presented here to speak with Severus about his own troubles with the expectations of their society.

“Good evening, Lord Prince, Lady Prince,” Marvolo greeted before he stepped through the gap the curtains of heavy velvet left into the space the other two were occupying.

“Good evening, Lord Slytherin,” greeted his Potions Master, while the wizard’s wife offered up the customary courtesy.

Of course they had been officially introduced at the first event they had both attended. So they could skip quite a few of the pleasantries required on a first meeting. But not all of them.
After the usual small talk about weather, common acquaintances, and the current company.

It took longer than Marvolo would have liked, but being polite was important. If he had wanted to get to the point as quickly as possible, he should have called Severus to a meeting through the Mark, and not initiated a talk in such a public place. Even with the voices of the other attendees a murmur in the background, and them mostly shielded from view, this wasn’t by any stretch of the imagination a private meeting.

“I have to say that I envy you for your state of married bliss,” Marvolo stated dryly. “Almost since the day the Wizengamot decided to grant me a second chance based on the law of Haxby, witches and some wizards have been haunting me in a bid to gain my hand in marriage.” He sighed over dramatically, gaining an impassive mask from Severus, who certainly had enough practice in keeping his feelings under wraps, and a quirk of her lips from Mrs. Snape.

“So not one of those seeking your attention has caught your eye, Lord Slytherin?” the young woman wanted to know, her arm linked with that of her husband. They clearly presented a unified front.

“I feel it would be a disaster to marry any of them. I’m pretty sure I couldn’t match their needs or expectations of what a marriage entails.” Marvolo wanted to scoff at his own evasiveness. He would have thought that it shouldn’t be all that hard to admit his own lack of interest to the man who had seen him at his worst, and whom he trusted enough to brew his medicinal potions. Marvolo thought he saw a flicker in Severus’ eyes at that, but Mrs. Snape seemed to have a little trouble catching on. “Has anyone made their intentions that clear already? That would be a little forward, wouldn’t it?”

“The political gain some might envision are met easily enough. But with marriage comes an intimacy, or maybe I should say an intimacy is expected, that I have no desire for. But I would have trouble turning a blind eye to infidelity, and that combination would probably prove frustrating for those seeking marriage.” Hopefully that would be enough to bring the point across.

Her eyes widened, her hand going to her stomach where Marvolo knew a new life was growing, she had understood.

“I fear there aren’t that many ways to evade the matchmaking. I managed because my occupation as a teacher wasn’t glamorous, and my position as heir to the Prince family wasn’t even known to myself. It seems impossible to counter the appeal of the Slytherin name.” Severus voice was smooth and hinting at all he didn’t voice. The fact he was shrouded in mystery, powerful, knowledgeable, and pretty good-looking, was only implied, and Marvolo was thankful for that. Empty flattery in this moment would have been irksome.

“Why not search for a marriage of convenience then?” Mrs. Snape asked, interested and confused.

“Not many who find themselves in a similar position would admit to not being interested in intimate relations of any kind. And duty might force them to marry anyway.” Marvolo shrugged and slightly turned so he would address Severus over his wife. “I would like to find a partner. But I fear my needs and wishes are hard to meet. As infidelity would cast a bad light on any marriage, despite my lack of interest, any person with need for such would be unhappy in a relationship with me. The fact that most of our population either fears me or loathes me adds to the problem. I would like to be able to speak and debate with a partner, not share my home with someone agreeing in everything, or holding my past over my head constantly. Anyone unmarried either is too young, or already at the end of their life. I can’t see myself with a young partner lacking the experience to keep up.” Marvolo trailed of, carding his hand through his hair in a gesture of frustration. It felt
highly unlikely that he would be able to find someone.

“These certainly are very specific requirements,” Mrs. Snape nodded, a contemplative expression on her face, before she turned on her husband. “I know that you are known as a discreet Potions Master, accepting commissions for complicated potions from individuals who wish to acquire something that they would prefer to get through channels not quite as public as the next apothecary.”

Severus only looked at her, waiting for her to reach the point she wanted to make, earning himself a huff and an eye roll, which caused him to smirk a little. They clearly were a good match.

“I’m not talking anything illegal. There are more than a few potions one might feel embarrassed about needing. Like those that force a reaction of a male that might not occur as easily with the wrong kind of partner. You know exactly which potions I’m talking about.”

Severus nodded, glancing for a moment in Marvolo’s direction, of course he would know which potions were used for that kind of task. Potions combating impotence and other causes leading to a similar effect belonged to the oldest known recipes. “They usually only are needed, though, when a marriage is already established, and are consumed with the goal to provide a child for the family. So my theoretical knowledge of people using such potions wouldn’t be of help here anyway. There is also the fact that my supposed discretion wouldn’t be all that good if I would actually speak of my supposedly existing customers. Or am I mistaken?” Severus’ whole posture and tone of voice was so serious that it was clear he was putting more emphasis on the whole thing than was needed, giving the whole thing an air of levity. It was kind of silly to first compliment Severus on his discretion just to turn around and practically ask him to reveal who those customers have been.

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In front of the curtains, or rather more to the side, Amelia stood listening in on the conversation. As not one of the three there had cast any privacy charms – not even the most simple ones – she didn’t feel guilty in the least for eavesdropping.

And what interesting information she had gathered. So, Lord Marvolo Slytherin thought of himself as asexual. The Dark Lord Voldemort’s sexuality never had been on her thoughts during the time they had worked to defeat him and battle his Death Eaters. And why should it have been? But now she was intrigued. She could relate to the desperate need to evade match-making mothers. It had taken a long time until the world had accepted that her need for a career was greater than her wish for family. That she just wasn’t interested in any of that never even had been considered a possibility.

As most of the magical community was obsessed with the need to continue families, admitting to having a sexuality not going along with the need to produce children wasn’t really the done thing. At least not in the open. In her year there had been a few that had been forced to marry someone they weren’t attracted to for the sake of the family.

Susan had told her about the rumours going around the school that there was a potion that would enable two wizards to have a child together with a surrogate mother, that would carry the traits of both fathers. If that was truly the case, the current popularity of Lord Marvolo Slytherin might help to break the customs forcing so many people to lead unhappy lives. Because having an affair might
be the usual way to handle the respective needs of such a marriage, it being discovered still carried a stigma.

But would she be willing to bind herself to the man who had been Voldemort to help in breaking those outdated norms? She certainly didn’t know the man well enough to contemplate something like that with any seriousness at the moment.

Shaking her head, Amelia walked over to a few of her acquaintances she hadn’t spoken to yet this evening.

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“Madame Longbottom,” Marvolo greeted their host for the evening, taking a flute of champagne from a floating tray before he stepped over to take a seat near the one she was occupying. “I congratulate you for an evening well organized.” Marvolo toasted in her direction before taking a small sip from his glass. Indulging too much wasn’t something he could risk.

“Thank you, Lord Slytherin. I have heard more than a few versions of an interesting tale this evening. It seems you have once again fought at the side of Aurors against an army of transformed werewolves, just a few nights after the new moon.” There was more than a little sarcasm in her words, and Marvolo couldn’t restrain a small chuckle from escaping.

Getting more comfortable in the armchair comfortably upholstered with a fine floral-patterned velvet, Marvolo drawled in a bored tone. “It seems the luck of always getting into dangerous situations my son seems to have is contagious. I was in the Ministry trying to sort some things out when Henry’s Patronus message reached me. Of course Amelia Bones didn’t hesitate to take action.”

“She certainly has earned her spot,” Madame Longbottom agreed with a regal nod. “And watching how the simple story evolves in the claws of the rumour mill is quite entertaining. I’m pretty sure that I know the facts of this situation. What I couldn’t extract from all those tales was the reason why you were at the Ministry.”

Smiling at the clear, but nicely done, attempt to fish for information Marvolo decided that it probably would be best to inform his son's regent of the current situation in regards to the adoption procedures.

“There is a boy by the name of Marcus, who is able to speak with snakes. Both Henry and I are determined to adopt him as soon as possible. There is no reason to not take him in, as he clearly is part of our family. I was at the Ministry to arrange everything needed for that. It wasn’t as easy a process as I had thought it would be.” Clearly surprised and intrigued, Madame Longbottom shifted in her seat, suddenly resembling a lioness about to spring into action. Marvolo went on, “Someone changed the way adoptions are handled, but it looks as if they started and never finished. There are new steps to take, things to prove, without a responsible department named. I’m baffled, not something I’m accustomed to.”

By now everyone Marvolo thought might be able to help knew about the changes and had the order to find evidence who had been the one to set this into motion, and what might be done to clear up this tangled mess.
“What an unprofessional way to go about changing such important procedures. That’s just not right. Can you give me more details? I’ll have to do something about this.”

All too happy to have someone investigate this who was not so closely linked to himself that it would raise suspicion, Marvolo started to explain what Mrs. Wisby and he had found during their search the previous day. Maybe they would be able to get this sorted before the next regular meeting of the Wizengamot in January.

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Friday, the 29th of December

It was early in the morning, the sun not yet even close to rising, as Walden Macnair stood waiting in the cold. He didn’t mind the weather, or the early hour, because what he was here to do was something he loved to do.

He was here to do the job the Ministry paid him for: Eliminating a dangerous beast by separating the head from the body with his favourite axe. When he had heard that Fenrir Greyback had been caught, a small, evil smirk had taken up permanent residence on his face, and he had started to sharpen his axe.

He had used the steel his father had given him for this purpose so many years ago. It just was better done by hand than with a spell. No spell had ever been invented to sharpen an axe the way he wanted it to be done.

When the sound of three sets of feet on snow reached his ear, Walden turned to watch the two Aurors bring the beast over to the block. The beast in the shape of a man, shackled both at hands and feet, didn’t fight, but was walking like a drunk, or someone heavily sedated with strong potions.

Making a face, Walden shifted the grip on his axe. He would have liked for Fenrir to be aware of what was happening, for him to be struggling and screaming in a fruitless attempt to evade the inevitable. This way it was only half as much fun as it could have been. No way to change the facts now, he should better enjoy this in all the glory there was.

The flickering torches illuminated the courtyard used for executions like this, casting their unsteady light over the few officials here to witness the execution of the long-standing death warrant for this feral werewolf. It was obvious that they weren’t happy to be here this early, waiting in the snow. But the orders had been clear, after waiting the time it would take for most magical ways of impersonating someone to wear off, the execution had to take place as early as possible to evade the curious masses and the reporters, and – most importantly – to make sure there was no chance he could find a way to escape.

By now the three had reached the block right next to Walden, and the Aurors were forcing the beast down to its knees, placing the head down on the big, sturdy piece of wood. A few sloppy wand movements and a murmured incantation later, the shackles were attached to the floor, preventing the beast from escaping.

With a happy grin on his face – behind the mask which was part of his traditional getup – Walden
positioned himself next to his target, taking aim and raising his arms with the axe high over his head.

The sound of sharp metal hitting something soft and then getting stuck in wood, rang around the small dark and cold yard just seconds later.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for making you wait another chapter for Marvolo's birthday. But I plan for the next chapter to have that part of the story ;)

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published on the 27th of April 2018
Next chapter planned for 11th of Mai 2018
Friday, 29th of December

Sitting down at the breakfast table, Remus first poured himself a cup of tea before he picked up the Daily Prophet. As Harry had holidays, Remus didn't have much to do – there simply weren’t that many essays to read and mark – so he spent his time reading books, the newspaper, organising notes for Harry to study in preparation for his OWLs, and so on. Maybe he should accept a few more jobs like the one he had at the moment to fill his time constructively. Or he could write a new textbook for History of Magic classes. A new one was desperately needed.

After he had eaten a good portion of his breakfast, and had braved the society pages droning on and on about a local art auction for charity, organized by the amateur artists themselves, his eyes fell on the section with various, mostly uninteresting notices from the Ministry.

There, between the announcement of a promotion and the search for a new supplier of tea for the break rooms, was the notification that the execution of one feral werewolf by the name of Fenrir Greyback had taken place in the early hours of the morning.

And that was all. No mention of the reasons the execution had been demanded, or if there had been a trial. Remus had known that there had been an outstanding warrant, and he really was glad that that monster was gone. But he had a bad taste in his mouth regardless of his relief.

Almost an hour after Remus had left his room, Sirius ambled down for breakfast, his hair unkempt and his clothes clearly not fresh from the wardrobe.

Remus raised a brow in silent inquiry. Sirius shrugged. “No sense in getting ready for the day, when I plan to go to bed again soon, is there? But I need to see if there's mail for me, write an answer to anything important, and eat something. I’m starving!”

With an indulgent eye roll, Remus returned to his paper, only to stare at the unassuming, much-too-short notice.

“What’s wrong?” Sirius asked between bites of scrambled egg.

“Greyback was executed this morning.”

A surprised noise from Sirius caused Remus to look up. “And why are you looking like someone kicked your puppy? I, for one, think it’s a good thing that vile bastard is gone for good.” Remus nodded, but frowned.
How to explain his mess of emotions to his friend? “I agree that Fenrir Greyback has earned what he got. But do you realize that there never was a trial, or even a hearing of some sort? Get enough people to agree I’m dangerous and out to infect as many as I can and the same could happen to me.” Remus knew he sounded bitter, but he couldn’t help it.

Sirius hummed, refilling his mug with coffee. “That would be unfortunate. That’s true. But I still can’t say I’m sorry that he didn’t get a trial. We both know he was a monster.”

Remus scoffed, folding the Daily Prophet with jerky movements before placing it at the edge of the table.

Sirius sighed, rubbing his hand over his face. “And I managed to step in it again. Right? Sorry, Remus. I see that there’s a bigger problem here. But isn’t Lord Slytherin working on that at the moment? I distinctly remember him speaking about the need for equal rights for every intelligent member of our society during all those dull parties.”

Now Remus rolled his eyes at his friend in exasperated amusement. Sirius really wasn’t cut out to be Lord Black, though it was admirable how much he tried to fill the role he had never wanted to take.

Sirius furrowed his brow in confusion. “What did I get wrong now?”

“Maybe you could be a little more active in this? Maybe push for rights not only for those infected with lycanthropy, but those with mixed heritage as well? Hagrid probably would be happy if there was less prejudice against half-giants.” Remus gave Sirius a pointed look, leading to the other wizard groaning.

“You make it sound so easy to overthrow prejudices hundreds of years old. Shall I advocate for goblins getting wands next? I agree that people with goblin, veela, giant, or something else in their ancestry shouldn’t get mistreated for that. But you know that realism is a thing, yes? Demanding too much, too fast can lead to backlash. I am already working to help get the laws against lycanthropes amended. It’ll take time. Years, probably. Maybe Harry’s children, or grandchildren, will be able to tackle the next piece of messed up legislation.”

Now it was Remus’ turn to rub a hand over his face. He knew that laws were changed faster than the perceptions of society. And that if prejudices weren’t countered slowly over long stretches of time, the laws were liable to be brought back.

Maybe Remus simply was unhappy with how the prejudices of others had hindered his own dreams all of his life. He wished it would be different, and was tired of waiting. “You’re right, Sirius. I think I’m getting a little impatient with the state of it all.”

Sirius nodded and let the topic drop, reaching for the letters waiting on a side table. For a moment the only sounds in the room were the fire providing them with warmth, cutlery on porcelain, and the rustling of parchment as Sirius went through his letters.

“Look, a letter from Jacobs!” Sirius exclaimed, holding up the letter he had been reading.

“What does he say?” Remus inquired truly curious.

Sirius quickly scanned the letter, his brow furrowed in concentration. “He has answers from the different magical schools he contacted. Not one of them has a Olivienne Moreau as an alumna, so he thinks she's most likely a muggle. The schools weren’t as helpful concerning her daughters. Sam explains that they all have a policy of not speaking about their minor students with outside parties.
Inconvenient, but understandable, I think. He says that he got a lot of answers to the inquiries he had posted in several newspapers. Working through those is his next step. Well, I guess it would be unreasonable to expect more this soon after he started to investigate.”

“But still we hope, eager in our impatience.” Remus commented, startling a laugh out of Sirius. They understood each other. Some things just took time, but even knowing that, they had trouble waiting while they could do nothing much.

oooOOooo

A last look into the mirror – “Lovely as ever, Augusta!” -- she made sure her hat was on straight and her robes were hanging correctly over the purple, velvet dress she had chosen. Since Lord Slytherin had told her about the mess he had uncovered while trying to adopt another child without proper family, thoughts about that had troubled her.

The other witches of her bridge group had been outraged when she had told them over their breakfast meeting this morning. They all agreed that it wasn’t right to put so many obstacles into the way of those that wanted to take in children without a proper family. They all had agreed that a child with such an obvious family gift as Parseltongue should be taken in by family without that much hassle. It had worked well in the past. Why should it be changed?

They all had agreed to keep their ears open and ask around to find out who had changed things so drastically.

Augusta herself somewhat agreed that the process so far had been pretty open to interpretation. At first she hadn’t been happy that there had been nothing that could be done about Lord Slytherin – then Marvolo Riddle – adopting Harry Potter just based on the fact that he could speak to snakes, the Slytherin family gift. She had had serious doubts about the man’s suitability as a father. Now she knew that the man made a decent father and was content with the way the situation had developed.

But testing someone to see if they were a suitable parent? How would that even work? Augusta was pretty sure it would take weeks, if not months, of surprise visits and constant monitoring. What qualities would even be tested? How kind someone was? How stern? If that wasn’t just as biased as the previous way of determining things, she no longer was Augusta Longbottom.

But at the moment, the fact that no one seemed to be responsible was the more urgent problem.

In a whoosh of green flames, Augusta whirled away through the Floo network towards the Ministry. Once she had stepped out at the other end, she spelled her robes clean with a flick of her wand. Sooty clothes did nothing to add to an imposing persona, and she would need all she could get.

The few people scuttling about the atrium quickly made way for her as she walked with determined steps towards the elevator. She would go up and into Cornelius’ office. He certainly should know about the mess some underlings had created. And if he didn’t already know, it was time he learned of it!
As was the case every year over the extensive season of social gatherings, paperwork and parchments had built up into heaps on his desk. And as he did every year, he came here in the last few days between the Longbottom Ball and the New Years Ball hosted at the Ministry on the first of the new year to get as much done as he possibly could.

No one would bother him with requests, he had no appointments, and both were requirements to get anything done around here.

He just had finished reading a terribly long-winded and boring letter from the Bulgarian Minister, when the door opened with a bang. Irritated, Cornelius looked up only to smooth his face quickly into the polite mask he wore most of the time. Whatever had caused the mood this formidable witch was in hopefully had nothing to do with his Ministry.

“Augusta! What a pleasant surprise! How can I help you?” With a happy smile Cornelius got out of his chair and walked around the big desk to greet her.

“I doubt you will think my visit pleasant when I’m done speaking, Cornelius.” That did indeed not sound good. Despite his apprehension, Cornelius kept up the pleasant face and invited his guest over to the seating area. Before he could start with damage control, he had to find out what really had happened to rile her up like this.

“Do you want some tea, Augusta?” She accepted with a nod and settled back comfortably in the velvet chairs.

“Are you aware that someone has been changing the rules governing the adoption process without finishing the job?” the older witch asked pointedly, sipping from her tea.

Cornelius frowned. Buying himself some time, he prepared himself a tea to his preferences, adjusting the amount of milk several times.

Cornelius thought quickly. He knew the laws governing adoptions. They were vague enough that neither the Wizengamot nor he were needed to adjust the procedures. “No, I wasn’t aware that there had been any changes. How do you mean that the changes weren’t finished?” That claim sounded rather ominous to him.

“Mrs. Wisby told about the changed procedures. And Lord Slytherin wasn’t able to discover which department is responsible for conducting the tests that are now required. So the changes weren’t finalized, and anyone trying to adopt a child now will be held up indefinitely by bureaucratic hurdles. That’s not a situation that can be left alone. It would be terrible for all the children who otherwise could join a loving family. So tell me, Cornelius, who had the bright idea to change something that has been working for hundreds of years?” The way she said that was clearly a challenge. A challenge to his authority, questioning his competency to lead the Ministry and make sure nothing major happened that he wasn’t aware of. And even if he hadn’t been a Gryffindor at Hogwarts, he couldn’t let this challenge go unaccepted. It would undermine his image in Augusta Longbottom’s eyes, and with her, in those of many others. She had a lot of influence with the older witches and now also an easy access to Lord Slytherin... and with him, to a lot of the more conservative members of the Wizengamot. No, he couldn’t risk this getting any more out of hand than it already was.

So he smiled winningly. “I’m sure we’ll manage to untangle what was done and add what’s still missing.” Augusta didn’t look too convinced that they would manage that, but she nodded anyway and started to relay what she knew.
Saturday, 30th of December

He felt his years more keenly than ever before. Or at least he could not recall ever feeling this old before. The medi-witch who had brought his breakfast and lunch had been kind and patient, answering all the many questions he had dared to ask among all those chasing each other around his mind.

Albus sat in his bed, pillows behind his back propping him up into a comfortable position. Next to his bed sat Minerva in a visitor's chair. She had had to surrender her wand before she could enter the room, leaving her miffed and Albus remembering the fact he was held in a secured room because they deemed him a danger to himself and others.

“You look tired, Albus. I had thought the healers were working on improving your health.” Minerva clearly was not happy with what she had seen so far. Security wards around the room, his food in bite-sized chunks to be eaten with his only tool a spoon, no healer or medi-witch entering his room alone. High security meant exactly that.

But as Albus was able to remember the plans he had made to escape, he could understand why they deemed such treatment necessary.

“Healing is an exhausting process, Minerva. And healing from that much dark magic affecting a person is even harder. I am tired, have been for a while now. But I feel as if a black mist has been blown away. Or as if a veil has been lifted, which was obscuring my view of the world. They truly do their best here.” He tried to smile reassuringly, but judging by the look in his deputy’s eyes, he fell short in his efforts. “What have I missed?” Albus quickly asked in an attempt to distract her.

Minerva’s look clearly said that she wouldn’t be fooled and had seen that attempt for what it was instantly, nonetheless she still let him change the topic. “There was no trouble at the school. But Fenrir Greyback attacked the Weasleys’ home and was apprehended by a group of Aurors who accompanied Lord Slytherin. He was at the Ministry when a Patronus message from Mr. Slytherin reached him. It was reported in the Prophet in great detail.” Minerva shook her head. “Other than that, there was nothing important.” Suddenly a bright smile broke through her stern façade. “Severus and his lovely wife have been absent from the castle for most of the holiday. Since he picked up the mantle of Lord Prince, and as a married man, he had a lot of events to attend and something better to do than stalking the empty corridors in search of errant students. I feel being married has worked wonders on his mood.”

Albus listened as Minerva filled him in on all the gossip he had missed. It didn’t go unnoticed by him that she was leaving out everything to do with him. Probably in a bid not to upset him.

He interrupted her rant about a row between Pomona and Rolanda – about some sweets stored in a cupboard in the staff room – gently. “Minerva. Don’t you think I need to know what the reaction to my… illness was? I’ll learn it either way. Better to hear it from a friend and have time to prepare. Don’t you think?”

She looked down on her hands before looking up again, searching his face. “Are you sure, Albus?
You look like you need rest.”

“That’s why I’m currently sentenced to bed rest. It looks like Poppy isn’t the only one adamant about this kind of thing.” His joke fell on deaf ears, only causing Minerva to give him a look. “I’m resting, Minerva. Please tell me what is going to be waiting for me once I leave the hospital.”

Minerva sighed, unnecessarily adjusting her rectangular spectacles, before nodding slowly. “I don’t know how she got hold of the information, but Miss Skeeter wrote an article about your illness, citing sources in the hospital. She was her usual self. To summarize: she made you out to be a fool and dangerous for the children even if you should… survive. Shortly after that, one of the governors came to the castle, more or less subtly urging me to take over the position of Headmistress. He wasn’t the last.” She folded her hands, looking down. “They probably will not agree to allow you to come back.”

Albus pondered her words, watching her wringing her hands. Could he deny the claim that he might be dangerous? Looking back at his actions in the weeks before he had been forcibly admitted to St. Mungo’s, Albus could see why there might be doubt about his suitability for his post. But it irked him anyway.

“We’ll have to see,” was all he said to this whole mess, as there wasn’t any reason to talk about it more. Their conversation switched back to the more inane stories of the days at the school, before the medi-witch on duty came in to send Minerva away.

Before long, Albus was asleep. Healing was a tiring process.

oooOOooo

Sonja and Severus had returned to the castle while many of the rooms at the manor were renovated all at once. The three elves had started with great enthusiasm on the changes Sonja and he had agreed upon. The garden had to wait until spring, but painting the walls, changing wallpaper, new varnish for the panelling, and polishing all of the furniture could be done now. The fumes and the dust had been too much for Sonja, so they were sleeping at the castle to avoid the worst of it.

With all the chances the last months had brought, Severus welcomed the familiarity of his quarters. His aimless wandering, while waiting for Sonja to be finished in the bathroom, led him to the fireplace in their cozy living room. There on the mantle stood the phial with the memory the Dark Lord had given him. He still hadn’t decided what to do. Did he want to see Lily's last moments? Or was he better off not knowing the details?

With careful hands he picked up the phial, spinning it between his fingers. Memories had an odd texture when captured like this. Not really water, or vapour, but still displaying properties of both. Severus sighed, recognising his wandering thoughts as his attempt to once again avoid making a decision.

“Are you okay, love?” Sonja asked from the door to their bedroom, clad only in her bathrobe, currently working on her damp hair.

Despite his troubled thoughts and indecision, Severus smiled. She looked absolutely tempting. “Depends on your definition of okay.” Severus gave his wife a wry smile, still fiddling with the cold glass phial.
“Why do you feel the need to even make a final decision about whether you want to view the memory or not?” Sonja asked, walking over to the loveseat while braiding her hair.

That was an excellent question. With a huff Severus sat down next to Sonja, carefully setting the phial down on the small side table. “I’m not really sure. Maybe because not deciding on a course of action feels like cowardice?” He shrugged, his gaze locked on the shimmering not-quite-liquid swirling lazily in the phial.

“You said it was given to you so you could make the decision on your own. You were not asked to return the memory by a certain time, were you?” Severus shook his head. “And it won’t get stale or something, right?” Severus snorted, but nodded. Memories stored this way – based on everything known today – would hold indefinitely. “So why not keep it as a memento? Keep your options open. You don’t want to view it now. But maybe that will change some day.”

With a sigh Severus let himself slump and moved so his wife could embrace him. A little rearranging later, they sat comfortably, Severus’ head resting in his wife’s lap. It cost Severus little effort to relax into her soothing caresses of the contours of his face. He wasn’t sure it would be easy to act as Sonja had suggested. But he surely would try. Maybe one day he would want to see Lily’s last moments. And until then, the phial could wait.

oooOooo

Concern for her youngest child and only daughter brought Molly to her girl’s door late in the evening. Ginny had been withdrawn and occasionally explosive over the last few days, avoiding company and eating too little.

And even now there was light shining from under the door, and it sounded as if something soft – a pair of socks, or a pillow, maybe – had just hit the door. If Molly knew her daughter at all, she was sure that there was something seriously bothering Ginny.

Cautiously she opened the door, peering into the dimly lit room, and spotted Ginny sitting on her bed in her nightgown. Tears were streaking down her cheeks, and her face was showing lines of frustration, while she was writing on a piece of parchment with a book as her flat surface. Since that horrible incident with the diary in her first year at Hogwarts, Ginny had never touched a diary again.

“Dear? What’s wrong?” Molly asked, stepping into the room and closing the door behind herself. After a moment's thought she flicked her wand at the door and the walls, setting up a rudimentary silencing charm. Her charms weren’t really that good, but after the twins once had commented that they couldn’t know not to listen in when she didn’t even make the attempt to keep them out with magic, she had come into the habit of casting the only silencing charm she knew whenever she wanted the closed door to be interpreted as a signal for a wish for privacy by the twins.

“How does Harry ignore me? Why doesn’t he love me? Can’t he see how wonderful we would be together?” At the end she was almost wailing her question, falling forward towards where Molly had sat down on the bed beside her daughter. Embracing her little girl, Molly thought about how she could help Ginny cope with her unrequited love.

Because from what she had seen over the last visit, Harry really wasn’t interested in Ginny at all. He treated her just as he did Ron, or Hermione. Maybe a little less friendly, because Ginny
probably had been a little aggressive.

Molly smiled sadly. Her little girl knew what she wanted and wasn’t shy about going to get it. But in this instance, that probably wouldn’t work out. So she gently rubbed Ginny’s back, letting her cry out all her frustration and heartache.

It took some time, but finally Ginny calmed down enough that they could talk. Molly set out to explain to Ginny why Harry most likely wasn’t interested in her.

“I think I have an inkling why Harry doesn’t love you like that. You know that he sees Hermione more like a sister, right? And they met when they both were just eleven. Practically grew up together. Ron’s his best friend, almost like a brother. When you met Harry, you were just eleven yourself, and Harry was only twelve. I suspect he just sees you as a sister. Maybe he isn’t even able to see you as a young woman. It happens when two people are close during childhood.” Ginny didn’t react in any way, still sniffling and pressed into Molly’s side. “Your father and I were in the same House, but we never interacted much until we were well on our way to being adults. I know it’s not what you want to hear, but it will probably make you happier to let go of your… idea of Harry and take a look at all the other boys.” Calling Ginny’s interest a fixation probably wouldn’t help matters, so Molly quickly chose another word. Maybe she should have started to protest Ginny’s insistence she would marry Harry Potter once they both had finished school when it first started, when Ginny had been learning to read. In a way she felt responsible for the situation as it was now.

Molly stayed with a distraught Ginny well into the night, and only left once her little angel was asleep. Maybe she needed to distract her girl the next few days and set her mind on other boys before she was to return to Hogwarts.

oooOOooo

Sunday, 31st of December

Flimm woke Harry early in the morning on this special day, just as he had asked the elf to do. It had taken a little convincing, but in the end Flimm had agreed to let Harry prepare the breakfast for this day. Marvolo’s first birthday since he regained a body and was trying to follow a different way.

Harry was convinced that a birthday was just as important as a family Christmas, so making breakfast seemed a good way to acknowledge the fact that Marvolo and Harry were a family now, and that Harry cared for Marvolo. At first Harry hadn’t thought he should – or even could – care for the man who had been Voldemort, but long talks with Mrs. Goyle had convinced him that no one had a right to demand explanations for how Harry felt, or got to dictate who he could care about or not.

Marvolo had made an effort to do right by Harry ever since he had adopted him. There probably were lots of people who would claim that Harry just could not forgive what had happened in the past, but as Mrs. Goyle had pointed out, they were not the ones living Harry’s life.

Only a blind man with no sense for his surroundings could have missed Marvolo’s habit of picking
the sweetest dish available at any given time. So he had created an apple compote, porridge with
nuts, raisins, and a number of different sweet additional toppings to choose from, a sweet bread that
was great with orange marmalade, and a big stack each of pancakes and waffles.

He had just finished arranging the table and casting warming charms – and cooling charms – on the
food so it would stay the perfect temperature when he heard Marvolo move down the stairs.

Preparing their cups of tea just the way they normally took it, Harry was standing by the table the
moment Marvolo walked in, as usual dressed in finely tailored robes.

“Good morning, Henry...” was the absent-minded greeting that trailed off at the end when Marvolo
looked up. Harry just had to grin at that look of astonishment.

“Happy birthday, Marvolo.” Harry waved his hand at the table and the food waiting for them. “I
made breakfast. All of your favourites, and a few basics.” When Marvolo only blinked a few times,
slowly, before nodding and turning towards Harry, the teenager had trouble containing his
laughter. It hadn’t been intended as a prank, but it seemed it had the effects of one.

“Thank you, Henry. It’s not as if my birthday was ever really ignored, but never did someone go to
these lengths to make me happy. Thank you indeed.” Marvolo sat and Harry followed suit, pleased
that his simple idea had been so well received.

They filled their plates with the food Harry had prepared, as well as fresh fruit and a few savoury
dishes Flimm had insisted on, starting their normal morning routine in silence. The holidays hadn’t
been all that long, but Harry had noticed that it was easy to fall into a routine that felt comfortable.

They split the Daily Prophet and each read their respective parts while eating to their heart’s
content. “Do you have any plans for today?” Harry wanted to know. “I know there won’t be a
party, but maybe a visit to the theatre, or something?” He wasn’t really sure what Marvolo would
like to do on his birthday. Dudley had always invited one or two friends to go on some outing with
him, and others Harry knew would invite all their friends to a party with lots of food and games.
Marvolo was more of the outing kind of guy – at least in Harry’s eyes – and probably had had
enough of parties with a large number of people for the next few months.

“I haven’t planned much. First I’ll have to deal with that,” Marvolo waved to indicate a basket
filled with letters and scrolls placed there by Flimm and ignored by Harry until now, “and later
we’ll be visiting Marcus for dinner. I asked Xerxes yesterday and he agreed. The rest of the day I
hoped to spend at home enjoying a few quiet hours for once.”

“You’ll have to write a response to each one?” Harry made a grimace in sympathy, but then had to
grin over the prospect of seeing Marcus again so soon. “Before you open all those letters, I want to
give you your birthday present.”

Marvolo’s look clearly said that he had thought the breakfast was all that he would get, and was
all, or even more than, he had expected to get.

Harry stood, suddenly nervous, and called “Flimm!” in the previously arranged signal to bring
down the easel which supported the painting Harry had finished in time. A few steps brought him
over to the cloth covered canvas. “I made this for you.” He shuffled his feet and felt ridiculous.
Why was he so nervous? Who was he kidding? He had put a lot of work into this and now feared
that Marvolo wouldn’t like his present.

With deliberate movements Marvolo stood, walked around the table and stopped next to Harry in
front of the easel. Then he waved his hand and the cloth moved upwards to hover up and away,
revealing the painting underneath.

Harry watched Marvolo’s face and felt relief when he saw wonder and a hint of happiness in Marvolo’s red eyes.

“That’s a really good painting of Hogwarts. I think I remember the spot you stood in to paint this. You haven’t been working out in the cold all the time, have you?”

Harry laughed, feeling like dancing now that his gift had been accepted. “I only made the first sketch standing there. After that I worked in the dorm. Hermione helped me with getting the material. It was fun. But animating the snowflakes to actually fall wasn’t possible anymore. I guess that’s something I’ll have to try another time.”

“We’ll have to find a good spot for it. I want everyone visiting to see it. Maybe we can move another picture to a different spot…”

They searched for a place to hang the picture and found one in the hall, where they moved the picture of an autumn forest to one of the guest rooms. After that Marvolo opened all his mail. Harry helped, and snorted more than once over the phrases that were used over and over again. It was pretty clear that there was obligation at work here, not real interest. And a lot of people obviously didn’t even care enough to pretend.

oooOOooo

Marvolo, Henry, and a once again shrunken Nagini were sitting at the dinner table with Mr. London, Marcus, and a few other kids. Nagini currently was slithering from one child to the other, getting scratches on her head and snatching a few small bites of bacon.

The fact how at ease the children were around his snake assured Marvolo that the decision to buy a snake for the science classroom had been a good one. To reduce prejudice, one had to start early on.

“What’s your favourite colour?” a little girl asked of Henry, who made a contemplative face. Marvolo watched with interest the way his son interacted with the small children while he ate his own roast and vegetables. He needed to set a good example.

“I guess I have more than one,” Henry finally answered. “I like the gold-yellow-red combination of Gryffindor, but green is a really nice colour too. And there isn’t much that reminds me more of the freedom of flying as a sky-blue.”

Several little heads nodded solemnly, forcing Marvolo to quickly cover his amused snort with a cough. It was just too funny seeing such young children so earnest. After the declarations of various favourite colours had finished, the conversation moved on to favourite animals, foods, and more of the same.

Even as it was funny conversing with young children, Marvolo feared that the novelty would wear off soon. It really was hard to believe he actually was working towards adopting Marcus and becoming the adult responsible for the boy’s life. The thought might even be more fearsome than death. Not something he had ever expected to happen. But that was true for a lot of things that had happened since the summer.
“What’s your favourite colour, Father?” Henry suddenly involved Marvolo in the conversation, who now found himself the centre of attention of all the children and an amused-looking Mr. London.

“I guess I like both the deep green of a dark forest, and the red of rubies, Henry. And before you ask, my favourite animal is the snake, or more specifically the boa constrictor,” Marvolo answered, giving the cheeky brat – he was grinning from ear to ear – a short little glare.

“Why do you call Harry Henry? Isn’t Harry his name?” Marcus suddenly wanted to know, looking curiously from one to the other.

Now the look between the two visiting wizards became uncomfortable. Of course Marvolo had stuck to his promise not to assume a familiarity that wasn’t there and address his adopted son by his new actual name instead of the nickname all his friends were using. And now they had to explain this somehow and in a way that the children sitting around them would understand.

“Well,” Marvolo started struggling to find words that would work, but managed to sound certain of himself. It always was a good skill to appear confident and sure, whatever one’s true state was. “Henry is the name that is listed on his birth-certificate. As Harry is one of the more common nicknames for someone named Henry, he has elected to introduce himself as Harry to those he feels close to.” Marcus still looked confused and turned to Henry when the teenager started to speak.

“Until I was adopted, everyone called me Harry. I was just a kid then, and I think father now calls me Henry all the time to help me get used to being called that. You see, soon I’ll be an adult myself, and adults don’t call each other by their nicknames all the time.”

“I want to have a nickname too!” Marcus claimed with conviction and soon a flurry of alternatives were offered from the kids sitting around them. Some of the ideas were absolutely silly – like snake-tamer – and others simply not really something that Marcus felt fitting.

In the end Marvolo ended that line of discussion before it could get even more out of hand and end with tears. “Most nicknames that aren’t obvious choices from a name come with time. Don’t rush it, Marcus, I’m sure you’ll have a nickname in time.”

After that Marvolo directed the conversation and noticed that keeping it from going in a dangerous direction was not as easy with children as it was with a group of members of the Wizengamot. And required a lot of the same skills.

It didn’t take long until it was time for bed, and Marvolo was pressured into telling a bedtime story to all the kids. Quickly everyone agreed upon *The Fountain of Fair Fortune*, and Marvolo started to read with Marcus nestled into his side. “Make a higher voice for the witches!” one child demanded once Marvolo reached the part of the three witches sharing their tales. With an internal sigh Marvolo started to make different voices for each of the characters in the story, much to the delight of the children listening. And to the amusement of the adults who also had made it over to the sitting room where everyone had found a seat on a chair, a blanket on the floor, or one of the many cushions scattered around the room.

Once the story was finished, the children – among them a few bemused looking teenagers – were ushered off to their beds, and Marvolo picked himself up from the cushion Marcus had insisted they sit on, closing the book to give back to Marcus. “Sleep well, Marcus. And pleasant dreams.”

Small arms wrapped around Marvolo as close to his middle as Marcus could reach. “Good dreams, Marvolo.” And off he was, running after the others, his book clutched securely in his hand.
“You’re a great storyteller,” Henry remarked as he slowly picked his way through the mess on the floor over to Marvolo’s side.

“You thank you, Henry. I once made an effort to school my voice to exactly that effect, if for another purpose than reading bedtime stories.” He hummed contemplatively before giving Henry a grin and a raised brow. “Maybe we should add such training to your schedule this next summer. It obviously has a number of benefits.”

Henry rolled his eyes and asked with obvious sarcasm. “You’re already making a list, aren’t you?”

Marvolo chuckled and only nodded in response.

“I might need to pressure you to come by more often for the bedtime story,” Mr. London remarked. “Especially the older kids tend to avoid company most of the time.”

Surprised, Marvolo gave the squib a questioning look. “I fear I might not have the time to start a new career as professional storyteller.”

“Too bad. Have a nice trip home. Lord Slytherin. Heir Slytherin-Potter.” The man gave a bow so well executed that Marvolo almost was sure his suspicion that this man had grown up part of a family of high social standing was correct. But as the man obviously didn’t want his familial connections known, and there was no current need to get to know them, Marvolo let the matter drop.

Both he and Henry grabbed their cloaks and walked to the edge of the wards. A short apparation with Henry as his passenger brought them home, where they parted for a moment, planning to meet up in the study to go over the steps they wanted to take in their goal to adopt Marcus into their small family.

Maybe it was time to get Henry’s opinion on his tentative plans to find himself a partner for marriage.

ooOoo

Harry quickly walked down the stairs to the Lord’s study, where he was to meet with Marvolo. The evening had been nice, and seeing Marvolo read a story to all the children had been something else. For a moment he had imagined how it might have been to have someone read him a story about witches and a knight when he had been Marcus’ age. Aunt Petunia certainly never would have picked such a story, as she and Uncle Vernon had even prevented Dudley from seeing anything on the telly which had any mention of magic. And anyway, Dudley had never had the patience to sit through a story being read to him. Harry remembered quite clearly the few instances in the early years in school when the teacher was reading them a story, where he had to avoid punches and pinches from a bored Dudley.

Shaking his head to banish this fruitless train of thought – he was fifteen going on sixteen, not five – Harry raised his hand to knock on the door to the study. When he heard the “Come in!” from inside he opened the door and stepped in.

“Come and sit,” Marvolo said, an opened letter in his hand. “Do you want to have something to drink?”
“I would like a cup of hot chocolate, please,” Harry answered, picking one of the two chairs by the
desk to sit down in.

“Madame Longbottom wrote to me. She is working on sorting out the adoption mess and has
drafted the Minister to help. She wanted to inform us, and claims that my involvement in this
would probably be an obstacle instead of an asset. So with a little luck it won’t be long into the new
year before we can adopt Marcus.” Marvolo sounded satisfied with the development, and Harry
had to agree that Neville’s grandmother probably was the best witch for this. She was determined,
imimidating, and known to be supportive of the light agenda. Where some people would be
contrary just because Marvolo wanted something, Madame Longbottom wouldn’t encounter the
same problems. “That’s good. Marcus certainly would benefit from getting here before the summer
holidays. So he gets you all to himself for the first weeks or even months.”

“You think that’s something he needs?” Marvolo sounded normal enough, but Harry had spent a
lot of time talking to him, so he was pretty sure he had seen a short spark of fear or maybe worry in
the other’s red eyes.

“I think he would probably have an easier time adjusting? But I’m not sure and not an expert.” In
that moment Flimm had the drinks appear on the desk, which offered Harry the opportunity to
conceal his awkwardness by sipping from his cup.

“Maybe we should consult Madame Goyle about this. She certainly is more of an expert on this
than either of us,” Marvolo decided after adding three spoons of sugar to his tea, stirring
thoroughly.

Fiddling with his cup, Marvolo took a deep breath, and Harry wondered what he wanted to talk
about that he was so obviously nervous, even in their own home. “Concerning the question Marcus
asked earlier. I understand that you might never be comfortable with letting me use a more familiar
address. Frankly I’m astonished that we have come so far. When I decided on my new path this
last summer, I never expected to find a true family. I’m not averse to calling you Harry. But I can
understand if you never feel enough at ease with me to grant me the privilege to use it.”

Harry had no idea how to react to this declaration and chose to change the topic to the next steps in
the overhauled adoption process. Marvolo allowed the change without protest, and when they
finally retired to bed, it was as if Marvolo never had spoken about his wish for a more openly
acknowledged closeness as father and son.

Chapter End Notes

Riada, thanks for bringing up the memory that Marvolo gave to Severus. I hope what I
added works for most of you.
And I wanted to thank Montara for letting me “watch” the way through the story by
making a comment on every chapter! I love when someone does that :D

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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During his long shower under gloriously warm water, Harry had thought about Marvolo’s declaration of the previous evening. It had been good that they had dropped the topic, and that the awkwardness had vanished after that. That way Harry had gained some time to think about it.

All in all, it probably was about time to allow Marvolo to call him Harry. Just as the Weasleys did, and most of his year mates from both Gryffindor and Slytherin.

But despite the closeness that had developed between them, Harry was still reluctant to take that step. Maybe talking with Mrs. Goyle would help him to sort out his head.

Until then there was still enough to do to distract him from thinking about it.

Harry was quickly dressed, his hair brushed so it didn’t look too messy, and he quickly walked down the stairs to where he could sense the delicious smells of breakfast.

“Good morning, Henry. A happy New Year to you,” Marvolo greeted, folding the newspaper and placing it to the side.

Harry smiled. It was a really nice feeling of home, the smell of sweet tea, fresh toast, grilled tomatoes and mushrooms… it was nice to know he would get to eat his fill. Lightly shaking his head to derail that particular train of thought, Harry smiled back. “Happy New Year to you too. I hope you had a good night’s sleep. Nagini was searching for a warm place and woke me.” In fact her cold body near his feet had interrupted his sleep more than once that night, but she had insisted on staying under his covers.

“As she chose to stay in your bed, I had no trouble sleeping,” Marvolo said with a grin, picking the Prophet back up. Harry rolled his eyes and sat down in his usual place.

For a moment they ate in silence, and Harry went through the schedule for the day. As this was the evening of the New Year Ball of the Ministry – the last of the many events he had to attend this season – there wasn’t a lot planned. So maybe he should spend the morning revising. It would make Hermione happy at least.

“I wanted to ask you something,” Marvolo started after Harry had finished his first plate of breakfast and was contemplating if he should take one of the oranges. “I’ve been pondering for some time now – and even more since we learned about Marcus – the expectations for me to
Harry felt his brow rise at the ambiguous way Marvolo described a potential partner. Most wizards would have spoken of a woman. Marvolo hadn’t specified. Maybe just like Sirius, his adoptive father had no preference in a partner one way or the other. “I guess that would depend.” Harry wasn’t sure how he would feel if they were to add another adult to their family, but he had learned during his therapy not to jump to conclusions with so little information.

So asking a few more questions was probably a good idea. “Do I know this person? Do you love them?” Why else would Marvolo ask something like this now, if there was no concrete reason to do so? Maybe he sounded a little colder than he wanted to be. And Harry felt the tension in his shoulders. While the addition of Marcus was decidedly a good thing, this was a risk. Or at least it felt like one.

Marvolo carefully set his cup down, looking clearly surprised, blinking slowly. “No. I’m not in love with anyone. This is a purely theoretical discussion.” The older wizard pinched his nose and Harry waited for more of an explanation, barely refraining from moving to sit on the edge of his seat. “By now I’m pretty sure that I have no interest in any kind of romantic relationship. So I would have to find someone with similar preferences. Anything else would most likely cause problems.” That sentence held a world of omitted information. But before Harry could find time to identify the missing bits, or ask questions, Marvolo had continued to speak. “This has become more urgent now, as the expectations of society for a young Lord to marry get more pronounced if a young child is part of the picture.” Marvolo took a sip of his tea and Harry tried to wrap his head around this conversation. Sirius had broadened Harry’s knowledge and perception on the interactions between people in a romantic sense. The Dursleys never had allowed for the possibility that there was anything else than attraction between men and women. What little Harry had seen of other families had only reinforced this picture. Romantic love was something happening between a man and a woman leading to marriage. Always.

Living in a boarding school among teenagers had shown him the possibility that girls might be interested in other girls, and boys in other boys. But that it was possible to simply not be attracted to anyone… that was something new.

“Why bow to the expectations of society at all in this?” Harry asked with a frown. There had been a time when he had wished Marvolo would follow the rules and laws more than he probably did. But in this there was no reason to do what others thought was the right thing. Just as he didn’t follow what others thought he should feel, Marvolo shouldn’t marry just because others thought he should.

“I certainly would prefer not to marry at all. But we would have an easier time with the adoption of Marcus – now that the rules have changed – if our family matched the traditionally expected… composition.”

Harry nodded slowly. That was a reasonable point. Living in Privet Drive and all the newspaper articles about himself in the Daily Prophet had taught Harry that people loved to gossip and were quick to judge. But if you had a tragic story while fitting their expectations, they would side with you. The tragic young man recently freed from a curse, the orphan adopted by that man, with a young love and the noble cause of taking in another orphan… it would make for great headlines. That much was clear.

But there were other things to consider.

“Wouldn’t that complicate other things?” Harry asked, shooting Marvolo a questioning look with a
raised brow. After all, there was still the *little* matter that the official story of Lord Marvolo Slytherin didn’t match that well with reality.

To that Marvolo gave a slow conceding nod. “Any spouse would fall under the same family oaths as you and I. But I agree that a certain level of understanding between a potential partner and me would be needed. I’m not all that optimistic that it’s an easy task. But as it would affect you just as much as me, I felt it prudent to speak with you at this point.”

With a sigh Harry took up that orange he had stared at and started to peel it, shredding the peel in the process and filling the air with its appetizing scent. That sounded as if it wasn’t all that likely Marvolo would find a partner. And maybe someone as a partner for Marvolo would help keep the peace, help make the changes Marvolo wanted to make the legal way. “I guess that there’s no reason not to meet whoever you may find?” It sounded too much like a question for Harry to feel comfortable. But in the end he simply didn’t feel comfortable with this conversation at all.

Having a little brother in Marcus was one thing. Getting another parent… he really didn’t feel good with that prospect. “Why not hire a nanny? There’s reason enough for us to not want another big upheaval at the moment.”

“Well, either way we’ll need a nanny. I have no idea how to care for such a young child. It’s not as if anyone would have trusted me to look after their children once I was out of school…” Marvolo trailed off and gave Harry a sad smile. “But I guess together we’ll manage to beat the odds and provide Marcus with everything I never had, and you never had.”

When Harry walked back up to his room – to work on his revision and the last bits of his homework – he thought that once again there had been a lot of things that hadn’t been said between them. But enough *had been* said. Harry and Marvolo were a family. They would look out for each other, and would do all they could to give Marcus a family as well. The way to this point had been anything but straight, but in the end it wasn’t that important.

With a smile on his lips, Harry got out his potions notes and started on the revision.

oooOOooo

Once again Severus had thrown himself into his best robes – amusing Sonja greatly with his scowl – for yet another inane social event.

Maybe not as inane as many of the others that had taken place the whole of December, but the mix of guests left much to be desired. There were too many people among the guests who were working for the Ministry.

But currently he stood together in a group with a nice mix of potions enthusiasts and healers, talking about the newest developments in the field of Potions. “There was a story that someone with kids in school told me,” said Healer Smethwyck from St. Mungo's while turning a little more towards Severus. “The story claims that there's a potion in development to enable two wizards to have a biological child with the help of a surrogate mother. I confess to being intrigued. Is there any credibility to this story? It seems too fantastic to be true. Almost like those stories about wizards with some dubious ancestry carrying their own children.” All around the witches and wizards gave polite laughter. Severus felt inclined to agree that those stories tended to be unbelievable, unclear on any substantial details, and most likely were fairy tales. But the
insinuation that his work on the two-father potion was not something worthy of acknowledgement stung.

“The first test with the potion is going well. The first subject is well into the second term of her pregnancy, and all is going as well as can be expected. Of course the viability of this can only be evaluated after the child is born and the test is repeated with other fathers and surrogate mother. But at the moment I’m confident that my work, which is sponsored by Lord Slytherin, will lead to a viable way for two wizards to father a child together.” Severus watched with quite a bit of internal glee as the faces of all those around him morphed from amused laughter into more serious expressions. Each of them knew what a revolution this would be, enabling gay wizards to break with the tradition of marrying a woman anyway just for having children, instead of getting together with another wizard.

For a while Severus answered various questions about his methodology in testing the potions and his failures on the way, but refused to answer questions about the three involved in this test, or the exact composition of the potion. Sonja’s presence at his side was a welcome anchor in the whirlwind of conversation. Maybe he would be able to bear the hubbub of a potions conference with her at his side. He hadn’t been to one since he had attained his Mastery. The general din of rumours, gossip, and mocking of those that hadn’t managed to invent something new in a while had always made him weary of those gatherings. The fact that most were taking place during times he needed to be at the school teaching had always been a convenient excuse. But with his wife at his side, he might enjoy the exchange between experts that also happened there.

“Why start with a potion to enable two wizards to have a child together? Why not attempt to enable two witches to have a child together?” A young healer in training – a witch in this case whom Severus could barely recall from his potion classes – asked. There was definitely a dangerous glint in her eyes, and Severus guessed that he might had been hard on her in potions, interfering with her wish to become a healer.

But that’s not what she had asked. With calm professionalism Severus answered her question. “I’m working on the base provided to me: the failed attempts of Salazar Slytherin, who was motivated by his wish to provide one of his sons with the ability to have a child with his lover.” Excited murmurs erupted in the group surrounding them. “I combined his theories with more recent information on human procreation to refine his methods, and change a few ingredients. He had tried to use blood or hair from both fathers. I changed that component of the potion and the procedure to be used. But I agree that a similar potion to achieve the same for two witches is a worthy challenge to develop, and a worthy goal to work for.”

That wasn’t what the young witch had expected to hear. Most likely she had expected that this hadn’t crossed his mind, or that he wouldn’t acknowledge the existence of witches in the same circumstances as gay wizards had often found themselves throughout time. She blinked a few times in surprise before regaining her equilibrium. “So you’ll attempt something like this next?” She clearly wasn’t convinced that he would feel inclined to do so.

“It’s an interesting challenge. While the need for a surrogate to carry the child would fall away. I have no idea how to get a genetic sample from the mother not carrying the child. I guess the work on the potion for two fathers will only be of little help.” The discussion spiralled into other topics from there, quickly reducing the group of them to only those really interested in potions, which enabled Sonja to feel secure enough to start participating. The fact that she was a Squib among fully qualified witches and wizards sometimes made her hesitate to engage in conversation not directly tied in with her field of expertise.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Severus asked her when their group decided to retreat to a much
cosier sitting area and they were walking through the rooms.

“Immensely,” she whispered back almost conspiratorially. “I love watching you discuss your work with this much passion!” They exchanged a quick kiss, and then re-joined the group which had already started to discuss the different merits of peppermint and its various substitutes in headache-relief potions.


The halls of the Ministry were filled with people in their finest robes. Those varied from years out of style and fraying at the edges, to the most up-to-date creations of velvet and silk. Sometimes even dragon hide, or some fancy pelt. It was a curious mix, and maybe the most entertaining of the gatherings.

The fact that there were also dignitaries of other countries at this New Year's Ball made it even more interesting for Sirius.

Currently he was dancing a line dance with a young French wizard who had as much fun flirting with Sirius, as Sirius had with flirting with the exceptionally handsome dark-haired wizard. They both hadn’t spoken that much, but there truly wasn’t a real need to speak. Glances, brief touches, and smiles were all that was needed to communicate.

At the moment, Sirius was pretty sure he would get more out of the evening than just flirting and dancing.

Earlier he had spoken with his godson, who was happy that this was the last ball for this season. After that the other kids of Hogwarts age had gathered up everyone and moved over to one of the smaller rooms off the main ballroom, to play games and talk. Thankfully Harry seemed to be in good spirits.

When Sirius spotted Harry with the blonde daughter of the Quibbler’s editor among the people dancing when he guided the French wizard to one of the quieter corners of the Ministry, he had to grin. It seemed that Harry was finally stretching his wings in the dating game. And that Lovegood girl seemed like a good match for Harry. She wasn’t one of those interested in his fame.

In even higher spirits, Sirius gave the hand he was holding a lingering open-mouthed kiss, before grinning up to brown, eager eyes.

This really was a nice evening, and it was about to get even better.


Marvolo just had watched Henry and Miss Lovegood dancing the third dance in a row – he would have to discreetly check the family's history, current political goals, and the like – when Madame Longbottom came over to him, a glass of punch in her hand. “Good evening, Lord Slytherin. What a rare sight to see you standing alone.” She sounded friendly enough and she had a point.
“I’m just back from a short break.” When one was drinking warm tea and punch all evening, short breaks were just a necessity. “And I have been watching Henry dance. Mr. Bagman told me just moments ago, how much better my son has become in dancing since the Yule Ball of last year’s… no, it’s a new year now, isn’t it. So, I guess I have to say, since the Yule Ball of the last Tri-Wizard Tournament.” Marvolo nodded in the direction where Henry was just leading Miss Lovegood into another dance, this one belonging to the group of more recently invented pair-dances. “He told me that Henry had considerable trouble in the one dance he performed then.”

Madame Longbottom nodded. “Neville told me that the ball had been fun, when he wrote home. But he wasn’t the centre of all the attention. I imagine opening a ball without any training beforehand and while still so young would be intimidating.”

Marvolo felt that this concluded the pleasantries customary at the beginning of every conversation. He was curious to learn what the formidable witch had managed to get done on the mess that adoptions in wizarding Britain currently were.

“Cornelius wasn’t aware of the changes, but that’s hardly surprising. We had a look at all the unfinished changes, and Cornelius had his assistant – Molly Prewett’s boy Percival – asking around. It seems as if a new hire – an assistant for several administrative offices – a Miss Susan Summers, has started the whole mess. She’s currently on holiday. So we couldn’t ask her for her motivation, or if she was acting on her own accord or at the behest of someone else.” Madame Longbottom clearly was agitated over the whole topic. The way she spoke with expressive arm movements was a clear indication, as she normally was a picture of the composed older Lady.

“I agree that finding a solution has priority over finding out who started the mess and for what reasons. What are the Minister’s thoughts on the situation?” Marvolo was glad that someone widely regarded as a light witch had taken such an interest in this. Madame Longbottom would have an easier time sorting this out. She was a woman and was respected in large parts of their society, and as a grandmother who had raised her grandson while his parents were in hospital, no one could claim she didn’t know enough about rearing children.

“Yes. A solution is the most important. Cornelius is about to set up a new office to take over the coordination of all the new steps. First we tried to just reverse the mess. But the members of the different offices were averse to such a step. Some were outraged that the Minister tried to intervene. Others are of the opinion that the procedure was in long need of an overhaul. I guess we’ll have to make an amendment to the existing laws to make that office responsible for overseeing the compliance of the procedures with the laws. Any ideas who might be the right person to have this office? Cornelius pointed out that there aren’t that many adoptions that they would have enough to do all year round. And he’s right.”

“Not from the top of my head, but I’ll think on it.” Marvolo nodded, already going over a list of his people in the Ministry. “What do you know about this Miss Summers? Maybe we can deduce her motives before she’s back from her holiday.”

“Mr. Weasley said that she was in his year, and a Gryffindor. As far as her colleagues could tell, she’s a muggle-born. I guess that’s the reason no one really knows where she is.” Madame Longbottom answered with an expression of concentration on her face.

“Maybe she felt that the procedures for adoptions are outdated? Henry’s friend Hermione Granger, Heiress Lestrange, had a clear opinion on the matter. I guess it’s not unreasonable to think others might feel similar.” Marvolo noticed with amusement how Madame Longbottom blushed a little. He hadn’t expected that she would feel embarrassment over the fact that she hadn’t approved of his adoption of Henry. But it was a clear indication that she now thought otherwise.
“That’s a possibility.” The older witch – older in appearance at least – conceded with a nod.

“So the discussion I had to witness will not repeat?” a female voice suddenly asked from the side, and both Madame Longbottom and Marvolo turned quickly to see who had spoken.

“Madame Bones, what a surprise,” Marvolo greeted, still feeling a little on edge around this witch. She was much too aware of people and their motives for him to feel really safe around her. She had been there when the werewolves had attacked her party, had seen how his Death Eaters still turned to him for orders. She had indicated, in the way she had asked him for how he wanted to proceed back when Fenrir had attacked the Burrow, that she expected him to insist on being in the role of commander… She clearly wasn’t as easily taken in by his story as all the others had been.

ooOoo

Since Amelia had overheard that conversation between Lord Slytherin and Severus Snape – she still was a little surprised that the proud man had taken up the mantle of Lord Prince – she had found herself going back to what she had heard over and over again. It didn’t happen all that often that she heard of someone openly admitting to their lack of sexual needs. And the fact someone so widely known and spoken about wasn’t really trying to hide it was something that didn't happening often. Maybe he really would manage to change the customs as he was slowly changing the status of werewolves, and the view on muggle-born children.

But she needed to know more about him before she could even contemplate marrying him while openly communicating that she only did so because they both were searching for a partner, or probably better put, a companion, not because there was anything remotely sexual happening between them.

She remembered clearly that he had said a partner would have to be able to stand their ground – Amelia was sure she would be able to do that – but not hold his past over his head – she wasn’t sure she would be able to let the past rest – she was old enough to have the life experience to keep up with him, and they shared at least a few interests.

But there still was the issue that she knew virtually nothing of the man behind the public façade. How much of the young man who fell under a curse, how much of the ruthless Dark Lord, how much of the consummate politician, and how much of the caring father was really a part of him? What was an act? What was true?

It was unlikely this really would lead to anything in the end. But… she felt curious as she hadn’t since she had left school. So she walked through the halls of the Ministry’s New Year’s Ball with her eyes peeled for the striking figure of Lord Slytherin. He obviously made an effort to look the part, and kept in shape, as his body showed.

When she spotted her target standing near to the dance floor, talking with Augusta Longbottom, she made her way over to them.

She got to hear the end of their discussion and was glad to hear that Madame Longbottom had taken up the task of solving the problem of the adoption process. With a smirk on her lips she took the last steps and posed the question that came to her mind the moment she heard what the two of them were talking about. “So the discussion I had to witness will not repeat?”
“Madame Bones, what a surprise,” Lord Slytherin said and Amelia noticed with amusement how quickly his mask flickered over into one of polite emptiness, just like the one most of the members of the Wizengamot wore all the time. He had let his guard slip a little around Madame Longbottom, a renowned light witch. That was a surprise, and only made the riddle more interesting.

“A surprise, Lord Slytherin? Why? You certainly must have known that I would be here, just as any other person working here. I’m certainly not surprised to see you and your Heir here, or the large number of journalists, or entrepreneurs.” It was fun teasing the man. And if the glint in his blue eyes was any indication, he saw the humour as well.

“That’s true. But I had thought that you would have no real interest in talking with me, Madame Bones. After all, besides the few times we have interacted in the Wizengamot, or the two times that we found ourselves on the same side of a battle, we have hardly interacted at all.” Lord Slytherin projected an honest air of confusion. He clearly was a really good actor. But that was something that could be said about almost all the most successful politicians.

“Isn’t that reason enough to change the pattern of our interaction? Use this event to get to know each other better? As I plan to stay in this position for years to come, we’ll continue to have to work together.” Amelia smiled and was aware it was closer to a sharp knife than a happy expression.

Lord Slytherin’s lips curled into a small smile before settling back into the polite mask. “A polite talk in the Ministry building certainly offers an opportunity to get to know a person that differs significantly from the one offered by a fight for one’s life. Even if I have to say that one can learn a lot about a person by fighting alongside them.”

“If you would excuse me?” Madame Longbottom said with a suspicious glint in her eyes, giving them a nod and then leaving them alone.

“I have learned that you clearly keep practising your duelling, Lord Slytherin. And that time without a body is not something that changes patterns in spellcasting.” Amelia kept a close eye on Lord Slytherin and thought she saw a flicker of surprise in those eyes. He blinked slowly a few times, as if truly surprised.

“I guess you might be right. I… never thought about it. But I hope you have recognized that the repertoire of my spells is different now that I’m no longer… out of my mind.” Amelia nodded, still concentrating to catch every flicker of expression she could. She had noticed that not one illegal spell had been cast by Lord Slytherin in either confrontation. And after the clean up that had been done at the underground lake, she knew that not one of the things Lord Voldemort had known were forgotten by Lord Slytherin. So it was a choice on his part not to use those spells. That he had managed to do so in a fight attested to a strong awareness of what was and wasn’t illegal, and a strong desire to follow the rules. What she couldn’t deduce from what she had seen so far was his motivation for that desire to follow the laws. Was it a true desire to turn over a new leaf? Maybe even a case of bad conscience? Or was it just the easier route to take? Feign a law-abiding life publicly, and do what he wanted in private?

She really didn’t know. And that troubled her. “Yes, I certainly noticed that. But as I’m sure you know, the Aurors and Hit Wizards made a point of watching all the memories they could get their hands on, as often as they could, to get an idea of You-Know-Who’s fighting style, searching for a weakness. I concentrated on the shields and less lethal spells. Those motions haven’t changed one bit.”

Pretty soon they were talking about battle tactics, and Amelia noticed with some surprise that Lord
Slytherin happily discussed past attack patterns with her, and even started to ask about defence methods that one could use to defend others from a group when getting to the fight after the attack already had started.

Lord Slytherin clearly was a riddle worth solving, and Amelia felt she would have fun doing just that.

oooOOooo

*Wednesday, 3rd of January 1996*

“Eighty-one was a profitable year for us.” Sam nodded politely as the owner of this pub – or maybe club, it seemed to be somewhat of a hybrid form – rambled on and on. For some reason he had started with the founding of this establishment to explain why he had written in response to one of the adverts Sam had posted in several newspapers. “The conference centre just down that street was new and brought a lot of people who wanted to have a nice few drinks after a long day. Sadly, they had to close a few years back. But I guess that would happen once the number of guests who came from there had decreased a lot… Anyway. I remember a Olivienne who was here back in February of eighty-one. There always were a lot of academics – engineers, doctors, lawyers – but few women, and even fewer black women with French names.” The man nodded decisively, moving as if to take a glass down from the shelves behind the bar. “You sure you don’t want to drink something?”

“I’m sure, thanks.” Sam declined for the fifth – or maybe even sixth – time. “Are you sure that she had been to the conference centre that day? And do you remember anything else? Other people she was with? Maybe what conference she attended?” This really sounded like the most promising lead of all those he had received and followed up on. There had been so many obvious false answers, and even more too-vague ones, but this? This might actually be a clue.

“Yeah, they all had those name tags, and big entrance cards and stuff around their necks. She had one of those when she came in, and searched for it later in the night, before she left with that good-looking man. Slim, and a lot of leather in his clothes. He ordered more than one round for everyone, and paid right there and then. Don’t get people like that so often that I wouldn’t remember them clearly. Can’t tell you the name of the conference though. Those cards never made much sense to me. And I guess it was neither the start nor the end of the month. But I can’t say what day exactly.” As Sam had declined a drink the man had replaced the glass and was now polishing those that were not yet moved to their spot.

“She met a man here and left with him?” Now that sounded like Sam had struck gold. Asking for a better description probably wouldn’t help, as Lord Black had said he had been using various disguises when going out in the city.

The owner nodded with a calculating glint in his eyes. “So you think this is a good lead?”

With a little internal sigh Sam nodded. Most of the obvious and not so obvious false leads had been people claiming to have information in hopes of getting something for it. One woman even had written claiming to be the one he was searching for. It had been rather easy to make her admit it was a lie and leave.
Sam got out his wallet to get out a fifty Pound note and slid it over to the man behind the bar. “Thanks for the help. And a good new year.” Sam was pretty sure he had gotten everything that he could have from here. As the conference centre had closed the next step wasn’t as easy as going there to ask what conferences had been held there and to go through the lists of people attending. But now he had a better idea where to search.

Walking out of the pub, Sam closed his coat. Time to go home. He had to write a report for his client.

oooOOooo

The fire in the fireplace and the few candles cast a warm glow all over the living room in Prince Manor, the turning of pages and the sound of quills being dipped in ink or moved over parchment made for a cosy atmosphere. The creation of a new potion, once the first idea was clear, always started with hours of research. Being able to share the work with a competent partner only made the process better.

“I didn’t know that there was a potion to check if a specific woman was the mother of a child. I mean, a woman usually is aware when she gave birth,” Sonja mused, placing one of the prepared ribbons into the book she currently was searching through.

“If I remember correctly, there was a Potions Mistress who was convinced that she had been switched at birth. She created the potion to confirm her claim, as she was pretty sure that her father was the one married to the woman she claimed wasn’t her mother,” Severus mused, noting down references to a few other works from the text he currently was reading.

“Did she succeed?” Sonja wanted to know, dipping her quill so she could make another note on one of her parchments.

“Not as far as I’m aware. The tale goes that she proved without a doubt that the two actually were her parents. But as we’re trying to create a potion to check for a familial connection in the past, this one should help us get a grasp on all possible connections through the maternal line.” Severus placed the quill down and looked up from the book on the table before him. Sonja was more lying than sitting on the loveseat in front of the fireplace, and they both had cups of fresh tea within reach. The problem he had been presented with by his Lord was much more complicated than either Sonja or he had thought it would be. All potions testing for the connection between a child and its parents – with only the one potion to check for the mother Sonja had just found – were limited to do just that. And what they wanted to have was a potion proving a common ancestor generations back. They both were stumped on just where to begin.

While they had identified some of the core ingredients present in each of the potions they had seen so far, and knew that the blood of the person searching out their ancestry was always used with the potion the goblins could offer, they had trouble going further than that.

“It’s fascinating how thorough the goblins and wizards have been in erasing all knowledge of the ancestry potion. One would think that there would be traces, or even just hints left somewhere,” Sonja mumured, setting her things aside to stand up and walk around for a while.
“There still is some knowledge left,” Severus stated drily, bringing Sonja to turn around so she
could see him, raising a brow in silent question. “We know that there is a body part of a goblin
involved.”

Sonja snorted and resumed her pacing. “Well, why else would they be the only ones providing the
potion while still insisting on making sure no one else knows how to brew it?” When Sonja fell
into a brooding silence after that, Severus felt uneasiness stir in his mind.

“You are aware that the Goblins will go to war again if any witch or wizard starts so much as even
thinking about re-creating the potion?” he asked his wife, who threw him a playful scowl.

“But it’s such an interesting riddle to solve! With the knowledge of potions we have, which parts of
a body usually lend themselves to which use, and the knowledge of the result that this potion
produces… It’s almost too easy to make a guess. I think it can’t be something like hair, or nails, or
some such. They would just gather and sell that stuff for money, and would hardly start to restrict
the number of tests as they have done now…”

Before she could continue any further, Severus stood from his seat, stepped into her path and
captured her hands. “Please, stop.” She stopped in her pacing and fell silent. “I agree that we
probably could narrow down the possibilities. But I don’t want to be known for being one of those
breaking the long-standing treaty with the goblins. Let’s have a look at rituals instead. Those that
once were used to get a complete medical history of a person. As far as I’m aware, there is a potion
needed for them that ensures the magic goes farther back than it would do otherwise. And maybe
we should identify means to combine or compare the blood given into the potion when two
individuals are involved. We certainly have a lot of avenues open before we have to resort to
desperate measures. Yes?”

Carefully extracting her hands from Severus’ grasp, Sonja enveloped him in her arms. “Don’t
worry, love. I’ll restrain myself and will not research this matter, however tempting it may be.
Let’s go over to the library and search for books on rituals. And while we’re at it, we can plan what
to do on your birthday.”

For a moment Severus was tempted to just let her search for the knowledge once forcefully
removed from all potions publications, but the chances were too slim that she would actually forget
his birthday – she was much too organized for something like that to slip her mind – to risk a new
goblin war.

“Maybe something small. Just you and me. First going to the opera and then eating at a nice
restaurant?” He offered up a plan instead of risking war. “After all the social events, some rest
would be good. Don’t you think?”

Sonja laughed, releasing him from the hug. “That sounds good. And as it is the last day before the
train brings the students back to the castle, we should use the opportunity until you have to be
available around the clock again.”

Hand in hand they walked over to the library – now cleaned of all dust, and filled with more books
moved over from Spinner’s End – to search for more texts to aid in their research.

Life very certainly was good at the moment, and Severus was determined to relish every bit of it as
much as he was able.
Albus sat up in his bed, a mountain of pillows behind his back propping him up. He still tired easily and felt the effects of prolonged bed rest. He would have to start slowly once he was allowed to leave his bed and his room here at the hospital.

In the visitor's chair sat his healer, Jeremy Jugson, whom he suspected was a Death Eater. The man had just arranged his parchment on the small table he had floated over to use, ready to take notes.

“How do you feel, Headmaster?” It was a conundrum for Albus how a Death Eater could hold the position of Healer at St. Mungo’s but he had to admit that the wizard never had been accused of being a Death Eater and therefore had no records stating as much. From a purely bureaucratic point of view, everything was in order.

“I’m tired and would really like to have a walk by the shore of the lake near Hogwarts. It’s quite boring being stuck here.” Even with the ritual that had been forced on him clearly having a positive effect on his mood and ability to think, Albus felt suspicious of this Healer, an expert on the effects of Dark magic. There was no way he would ever feel safe at the mercies of such a man.

A long-suffering sigh left the wizard in lime-green robes. “Headmaster, I hope you realize that every healer of this institution has to make a vow to put the best interest of their patients before any other concerns or alliances. So any past or present family alliances, or obligations, are meaningless. Whoever comes to me for help will receive the best care I can provide. Even if their stance in politics or other fields are opposed to mine. Everything would go much smoother here if you could manage to look past your prejudices, sir.”

This objection was brought forward in such polite words and with such a friendly demeanour that Albus was taken aback for a moment. This certainly was the reason why the man had managed to get this far in his young career. “You surely can understand why I might be cautious around people who associated themselves with certain circles in the past.” If there was another Healer with as much authority in this field, Albus would have asked for that one to treat him. And maybe he should, now that he seemed to be on the mend.

Another sigh recaptured Albus’ attention. “I had thought that you would approve of someone channelling their youthful indiscretion and curiosity into something that is useful for society as a whole. I became a healer in the treatment of the effects of Dark Magic, as there always will be such a thing in the world, and people in need of help.” The Healer rubbed his eyes and took up his quill. “Anyway, this doesn’t help us in getting you back on your feet, Headmaster. So I would greatly appreciate your cooperation. If you please would answer my questions with more than the shortest answer you can come up with?”

With a conceding nod Albus gave in. He could see the point, even if he would love to have a Healer more in alignment with his own political stance. Those were not easy to find, as they all generally tended to avoid working with dark magic, and therefore were lacking in the knowledge and experience needed to work with wizards and witches suffering from long-term exposure.

“Beside tiredness, do you feel any other bodily symptoms? Headaches? Pains in joints or bones? I see that there have been no more high temperatures in the last few days.” And the professionalism was back, their brief discussion and short allusion to past connections to the organisation known as Death Eaters put aside.
“I feel shaky, but my joints are only complaining on a level I have grown accustomed to. The perils of old age, I’m afraid. But I feel that I have much less appetite than I’m used to. But I’m not sure if that’s merely a side effect of the lack of foods I like.” In fact one thing he felt the loss of quite dearly was the food quality and variety offered at Hogwarts. “And I’m bored. Having nothing to do isn’t something I have experienced all that often.”

Mr. Jugson was scribbling away on his parchment, taking notes. This question and answer pattern went back and forth for some time, Albus trying to answer honestly while also keeping a close eye on the wizard asking and taking notes.

“I feel you’re making good progress, Headmaster. I will inform the medi-witch that you are allowed to go to the common room tomorrow. There you can select one of the books or magazines to take back to your room, maybe that will help holding back some of the boredom. You may also ask your visitors to bring you something to read. But remind them to keep to light reading. Nothing too complicated or upsetting. If you stay this cooperative, in the next week or so, we might be able to release you into the care of your family.”

“Will this information find its way to the newspaper as well?” The moment he had spoken, Albus realized that it might have been unwise. But the blush staining the Healer’s cheeks was pretty surprising, so Albus let his worries over his own lack of discretion drop.

“All of the staff is most distressed over this leak of confidential information. Checks of the wards around the patients' files and the anti-eavesdropping charms on our staff rooms have turned up no weak spots. And the vows we have made are airtight. At the moment, further inquiries are being made into who might have given information to Miss Skeeter and what the hospital can do to prevent further breaches of privacy.”

Albus gave a gracious nod and refrained from pointing out that Miss Skeeter might only have guessed, or lied about her source. He did not for a moment doubt that his brother might plant such information to keep him from returning to the position of Headmaster. After all, it had been Aberforth’s doing that got him into the hospital in the first place.

At the moment Albus wasn’t even sure if he could be angry with his brother for that. The safety of the students should be the main focus of the Headmaster of Hogwarts. And admittedly, since the adoption of Harry Potter by Tom his focus had slipped from that goal.

After the Healer had gone, Albus removed the pillows so he could lie down and take a nap. This constant fatigue was most annoying.

Chapter End Notes

I have written an Out-Take about the reason why the goblins went to war over the ancestry potion, and why they have reduced the number of tests available in a certain time. You can find it in my small collection of Out-takes to this story, together with a few others.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Therapy

Chapter Notes

I want to thank you all for your continued support, all those comments you write, and the time you spent to tell me what you think, all of them help me stay on track writing, inspire new ideas, and make me able to manage the schedule I have set for myself! At the time I’m writing this there are 3907 reviews on ff.net I'm so happy for each single one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, 5th of January 1996

Sirius was bounding around over the short grass on the lawn covered with a thin layer of ice and snow. This was a night of the full moon, and the moon was about to rise over the horizon. Since their time at Hogwarts they never again had had such a secure location to run in as they had now. And even though he wanted to think badly of Lord Slytherin, there was nothing he could criticise about the wards the man had set up. Sirius had spent the whole day checking them over, even as Remus had insisted that it wasn’t necessary.

And Remus had been right. And the old bookworm had known it, looking smug as hell when Sirius had come back into the room where Remus had been resting on a kind of divan bed, already under a strain because of the nearness of the full moon.

Now Remus was getting rid of his clothes – as Sirius could clearly hear, even as he kept looking elsewhere just as Remus had requested – so he wouldn’t shred the trousers, shirt, and robes during his transformation.

With enthusiasm that felt a little ridiculous – he really wasn’t five anymore – Sirius moved his nose down to the ground searching for interesting scents that might lead them into a merry chase and to something for Remus to fill his stomach with.

It was also a way to distract himself from the horrible sounds that suddenly filled the air as the moon started its ascent into the sky. Bones were breaking, things were tearing, and Remus first groaned in pain only for the sound to shift into a decidedly inhuman whine and howl. With the wolfsbane potion the transformation was less painful, but that didn’t eliminate all the discomfort. Unfortunately.

In the past Sirius had been fascinated by the shift, always watching when it happened, eagerly following the slide of muscles and rearranging of bones. The first time he had seen someone take Polyjuice potion he had seen the similarities and had to ask Remus if the change felt similar at all.

Remus had said that the transformation he went through each month was at least ten times worse.

But only now, after he had suffered himself for years in Azkaban, did Sirius understand that Remus might not actually feel comfortable with Sirius watching the transformation that closely. The fact that it had been a regular part of all the nightmares Sirius had had in his dank cell back at the prison
might have contributed to his awakened awareness. In fact, the more human awareness Remus had gained through the potion he was now taking to make his transformation safer, pushed Sirius into contemplating all this, because now Remus would remember much more clearly.

Maybe earning his friend's wrath was so not worth it.

Anyway, while Sirius had found the older trail of some birds, and a fresher one of a few deer, Remus had finished his transformation, and now a shaggy wolf was standing next to Sirius, head tilted to the side as if asking what Sirius had found.

With a happy bark Sirius moved his front paws and stretched out, butt in the air, tail wagging, asking his friend to play with him. Only moments later the two of them ran, chasing each other, one of the light birch woods their destination.

This was so good. He needed to make sure that he could run with Moony each month. And how much better Moony looked. His fur was thick and free of matted or dirty patches, he had gained weight as well as muscles. It was obvious that living with a friend, regular meals, and a steady job that he loved were doing him good.

Dismissing all those grown-up thoughts, Sirius immersed himself completely in the moment, he in his animagus form – kept warm by his thick coat – running alongside his very good friend under the full moon over snow-covered ground. There wasn’t much which made him feel as free as he was now. And without the need to avoid professors or other students, there was nothing they needed to worry about.

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Saturday, 6th of January 1996

Marvolo had apparated them to a spot within walking distance of Madame Goyles’s office. They had appointments following one after the other, and Harry’s was to be first. Marvolo had brought a few muggle books – Harry had been really surprised to see them come out of a package Marvolo had received at breakfast – he was planning to read while he waited.

“You don’t need to wait for me, you can use your portkey once your appointment is done with,” Marvolo explained, not for the first time.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I understood the first time. I’ll make Hermione proud and go over my notes for Runes again.”

Their arrival at the office building put a stop to the – admittedly short – conversation. It didn’t take long, and the two of them were inside the office being greeted by Madame Goyles. “Come in, come in. A tea, Lord Slytherin? Or do you wish to return later?”

“I’ll take the tea and will be waiting here. Back in my office the desk is covered in parchment. I’d never be able to find the peace of mind I need to read these,” he motioned his one arm where he held the books to clarify his point, “if I were to return there.”

“Sit down then,” Madame Goyles said, waving at one of the chairs in the nicely appointed room
intended for patients to wait for their appointment. “Harry, do you want a tea as well? Or would you prefer something else to drink?”

“I’ll take a tea as well. Thank you.” It didn’t take long to fill each of their cups with tea and add milk, lemon, and sugar to everyone’s liking. Harry had to school his features to avoid grinning over the three heaped spoons of sugar Marvolo added to his measly cup of tea. It wasn’t even a big one! That quirk was something that Harry probably would always find funny.

Marvolo settled into one of the chairs, cup close at hand, and started reading, while Madame Goyle and Harry moved into the room where they always had their talks. Harry was nervous yet again, just like he had been before every other session before this one. He was pretty sure that they did help, but that didn’t change his nervousness about them.

“How have your holidays been? I remember that they’re quite exhausting with all those events to attend,” Madame Goyle started the conversation.

For a moment Harry was startled. He totally hadn’t thought about the fact that Madame Goyle had grown up in the magical world. Well, at least until she hadn’t gotten a letter from Hogwarts. And as an eleven-year-old would have to spend at least the school holidays with her family, it was almost a given she would have had more or less frequent contact with the magical world. “It was a lot. But I guess there isn’t really a way to get around it. Not if I want to fill the role of Lord Potter once I’m of age.” Harry shrugged a little helplessly. “And it wasn’t all bad. I got to spend time with my friends. Got to dance. At least part of it all was fun.”

“It’s good to hear that you had fun. And you’re right that all these obligations come with the title of Lord in the magical world of Britain. But I hope you’re also aware that there is no real obligation for you to pick up the title. You could just let it rest with a regent as you have now. It is an option.”

Harry frowned for a short moment. And then slowly shook his head. “I didn’t know that.” But it wasn’t that surprising. Most of those who had any interest in telling him something about how this all worked, also wanted him to actually do that job. Madame Longbottom clearly wanted him to take over where his father had left off, and his grandfather before that. Sirius hadn’t been all that thrilled with the idea, but now he had picked up his own family title, so clearly he would argue more for Harry to join him in the misery than agree with his letting the responsibility go. And Marvolo had adopted him to have an heir. But not only that. The fact that Marvolo clearly was someone who wanted power meant he probably didn’t even consider the possibility of Harry not wanting that kind of responsibility.

Then another thought struck him. “You did look that up?” Why else should Madame Goyle know of something like this?

“To effectively help you, I need to know the circumstances affecting you. So, yes I did look up a few things I wasn’t all too sure about.” Madame Goyle smiled kindly, admitting to doing research.

Harry nodded, he guessed he could accept that. And maybe Marvolo would explain how keeping a regent even when he was an adult would work. At the moment it felt good to know all this stuff, to learn how to take up the job. But as he didn’t really know what he wanted to do as a job to earn money – estate management wasn’t all that interesting – after he was finished with school, knowing all his options to get more free time was important.

“Did anything change? It was, after all, the first time since the summer that you spent more time with your guardian.” She really was good at keeping the conversation on track, while also allowing him to go off on a tangent if something came up that he felt strongly about, or needed help with.
“We found out that there’s another parselmouth. He has no family. At the moment, at least. And is cared for at the school that Lord Lestrange founded this last autumn. We want to add him to the… our family. So we’ve been meeting him a lot. So that he can get to know us, while still staying somewhere where he feels safe. You know?” Harry started explaining more than a little awkwardly. He had planned to ask Madame Goyle about how to handle all this, after all.

She nodded, not saying a word or betraying any thoughts, only smiling pleasantly, looking attentive.

“The day before the Ministry Ball, Marcus – that is, the child who’s a parselmouth – asked me over dinner why Marvolo calls me Henry. Because my name is Harry. And, well it’s kind of… hard? Marvolo later said he’d be happy to call me Harry, but could understand if I never felt comfortable with that. And I simply don’t know what to do. Because, well… it’s kind of true that we’ve become close. But on the other hand, there’s still the past. It hasn’t vanished… But I know I shouldn’t let others dictate what I need to be happy.” Harry carefully placed the now cold mug of tea down, throwing his hands up in confusion and defeat. He just couldn’t figure this out.

For a few moments silence filled the room. Madame Goyle tapped her pen a few times on the clipboard she was using to make her notes on and finally kindly but firmly pointed one thing out that Harry had known already. “Only you can make that decision, Harry. You already have listed the most important facts in this. You are close to your guardian. The past of what he did, and what happened between you, will never just vanish. Others can’t make the call on what is needed to make you happy and lead a good life.”

Harry growled in frustration. It would have been too easy, but sometimes it would be nice for something to be easy in his life.

Madame Goyle had the nerve to chuckle. “Just remember that there’s no need to make a decision about this right now. There’s time. Isn’t there?”

Harry nodded, and they slid into easier topics for a while. It was clear that Harry would have to ponder the problem with the name for a little bit longer. And at least until the Easter holidays, or even the summer, Marcus wouldn’t be living with them. And the explanation that Marvolo had come up with worked well enough.

Harry just knew that the thought would pester him until he finally came to a decision. It would be a pain for a while to come.

ooOoo

Henry looked wrung out when he stepped out of the office followed by Madame Goyle. Not too surprising, actually. Marvolo himself felt those sessions draining, and not in a good way. Confronting thoughts one normally avoided, facing uncomfortable truths… it was hard. Harder than Marvolo had thought, and harder than he ever would admit.

With a flick of his wand, Marvolo shrank the different parenting guide books he had ordered – and started to read while he had waited – and let them slip into his pocket, standing from his seat.

“I’ll come home right after I’m finished here. You don’t need to study if you don’t want to. It has been a long day already. And the essays you have shown me so far are of good quality. You can
afford to have a slow evening, Henry.” And it was true too. It seemed as if only a little encouragement had been needed to help Henry apply himself to his schoolwork. Marvolo didn’t remember that much about all the lessons Quirinus had taught while supporting Marvolo’s then bodiless spirit. But he had paid attention in quite a few of the Gryffindor first-year classes. He had been interested in Harry Potter and his performance, after all. Then he hadn’t been all that impressed, even more angered over the fact that this mediocre boy had bested him somehow. But now he was pretty sure that the under-performing he had witnessed had been caused by a mixture of factors, Quirinus’ stutter being just one of them.

He watched as Henry took his portkey back to their home before following Madame Goyle into the office, where he sat down in the only place where he had neither window nor door at his back.

As usual he placed his wand in the box he had transfigured on his first visit here, before he sat back and tried to relax.

When the tomcat living in this office suddenly landed on his lap, Marvolo almost jumped out of his robes. And then the infernal thing started to purr!

Marvolo watched with speechless amazement as the cat got comfortable on his lap, of all possible places.

“He seems to like you, Lord Slytherin” Madame Goyle commented, just to dive right into the questions she usually asked. “What’s on your mind these days?”

“Lots of things,” Marvolo answered, giving up trying to find a good place for his hands and finally resting them right there on top of the kneazle mix purring in his lap. Those animals clearly were fearless.

For a moment Marvolo breathed in the long-practiced patterns of his occlumency training, his hands caressing the purring cat almost of their own volition. It was oddly relaxing.

It probably would be a good thing to get the worst, most complicated concern out of the way first. “At the moment, everything has lost importance compared to my… doubts about my suitability to be a father to a child much younger than Henry.” There, that was accurate, but didn’t state that he had felt real panic the first time he had realized that he would come to be responsible for a child as young as Marcus.

“You don’t think that you’ll be able to provide what is needed for a younger child? But you feel that you’re doing well with your teenage son?” Madame Goyle always insisted on getting him to make clear, precise statements, formulate the facts as he knew them, and above all else be honest, however hard it might be for him.

“Henry can take care of himself. He can dress on his own, now that he has suitable clothes. He can eat and not make a mess, knows when to take a shower, how to care for his teeth, how to tie his shoes. I don’t need to make sure he’s entertained, don’t need to fear he’ll play with the fire in the fireplace or torment the house-elf. There’s so much that can go wrong!” Marvolo fell silent suddenly. That had come out more panicked than he would have wanted.

“That you know of those possible problems, that you’re thinking about what might be possible problems with a young child. Both are evidence that you’ll manage, Lord Slytherin,” Madame Goyle said, not unkindly.

But her unwavering politeness didn’t really fool Marvolo. It was a mask, just like his politeness or his mask of confused uncomfortable young wizard whenever someone brought up his past deeds.
“I grew up in an orphanage during the aftermath of the Depression, and during the second world war. I don't have a single good example of a father in my past. In fact, most that should have been father figures for me I would call disastrous to emulate. How will I ever be able to provide for more than the material needs of the child?” Because between him and Henry they would make sure Marcus would have everything he could ever need. Enough food, a warm home, clothes that actually fit, games and toys. But with Henry away at Hogwarts most of the year, would he, Marvolo, be able to provide for the emotional… needs?

For a moment there was silence, only the purring of the cat making any sound, while Madame Goyle clearly pondered her answer.

“As I said, your awareness of the possible problems, and your desire to do right by the child, is more than some parents can claim for themselves. I would propose the hiring of a nanny as on-site support, freeing you of duties like helping the child dress, bathing, and other daily things along those lines. And for everything else, the willingness to try and ask for help when needed will get you a long way.” This was delivered in a matter-of-fact tone that had a calming effect on Marvolo. It was true he had planned to hire a nanny anyway. All the daily stuff would be covered that way. The thought of not being required to dress a small child was a relief.

After that they talked about what Marvolo might prepare before Marcus came to live with them. Prepare a room, find a nanny, organise a way for Marcus to get to school each morning. He felt that this might be a good way to manage his nervous thoughts. He always did better when he was able to act. Regardless how much planning and preparation were part of him, the inability to act, being forced to just wait and see what would happen was always galling. He guessed that was a characteristic that all Houses shared. Having to wait without the ability to influence the outcome, either by knowing things, working hard, scheming, or rushing in, was hard on anyone.

The talk about planning and preparations had brought another thought to the forefront of his mind. There was still a man being held captive at his Headquarters who was thought lost in some remote wilderness during bad weather. Maybe it was time to do something about that.

When he made his way home he found Henry sleeping in the library, a book on different kinds of paintings, their history, and the history of their makers open in his lap. With a smile on his face Marvolo carefully woke his son, gently shaking the boy by his shoulder. “Go to bed, Henry. Sleeping on the couch will only lead to a crick in your neck and a sore back.”

With a sleepy mumble Henry stood from the sofa. “Good night. See you at breakfast.”

“See you at breakfast. I might leave the house again for a short time, but I’ll be back before long.” He really should do something about Karkaroff.

ooOoo

When he stepped into the small room that had been Igor’s prison for many months now, the first thing Marvolo noted was the putrid smell. It was obvious that the man hadn’t been able to bathe, hadn’t gotten the best food or any access to a toilet.

A grim satisfaction settled in Marvolo as the traitorous wizard noticed his presence and started to beg, moving so he was kneeling – with obvious difficulty – raising his hands in a pleading gesture, mumbling words that were mostly unrecognisable.
He was a pathetic sight.

“You know that you’ll never leave here alive. Why do you still beg?” He would have to make sure that the body of Igor would be found near where he last had been seen. And the body needed to appear as if he had died of natural causes plausible for a man lost in a storm. Maybe a fall breaking his neck? That should be easy enough to accomplish. Maybe they would need to heal him first, erase all traces of the many hours of torture they – and before anyone else, Marvolo – had heaped upon him. The possibility that some magical investigators would get involved wasn’t something he could just disregard.

Additionally he would make sure that there would be no doubt that the body had been there the whole time. Insects, animals and scavengers would have left their mark, as would the weather.

So Malcolm would have to start healing the man, and they would have to move him, the current conditions wouldn’t help the changed goal. And until the man was a clean slate again, Marvolo would have to do some research to find the right rituals and curses to mask the fact that Igor Karkaroff hadn’t died in that storm last year, living in captivity instead.

Only one question remained. Would he kill the traitor in front of his Death Eaters? Or let them keep wondering, maybe even believing that the man still was a captive used as a tool to help Marvolo manage his anger and frustration?

That was an important decision, as either course of action could have positive and or negative reactions from his followers. He needed to weigh the pros and cons before he committed to one over the other. But first he would inform Malcolm of his newest task.

oooOOooo

Sunday, 7th of January 1996

They were surrounded by the glaring orange of the Chudley Cannons that Ron had covered all the walls with. Quidditch players zoomed in and out of their posters, and from time to time the groaning of the ghoul in the attic was loud enough to be heard over the experiments down in the twins’ room and Ginny’s complaining about the noise.

Carefully moving one of his pawns, Harry sat back on the big orange pillow, feeling content. “I’m really hoping that Ginny’ll manage to get over her crush on me.” And how dearly Harry wished that the girl would overcome her fixation. “She’s pretty, and nice, but more like a little sister,” Harry quickly added to prevent Ron from exploding on him. His friend really tended to overdo the big-brother routine.

“I’m pretty sure those other girls had a lot to do with the whole,“ Rone waved his hand vaguely in the air, “mess. And that you’re now the heir of Slytherin on top of the whole boy-who-lived stuff didn’t help either.” Ron moved his rook, making Harry wonder how many moves the redhead was planning in advance, because he couldn’t see what this was going to accomplish, and then looked up with a thoughtful expression on his face. “Do you think it would have been easier to get a date to that Yule Ball as the heir of Slytherin?” Ron asked.

“I was a champion and the boy-who-lived back then. Can’t see how being heir of Slytherin on top
of that would have helped any.” Harry shook his head, contemplating his next move. He was going
to lose anyway, he was pretty sure. The chess pieces didn’t like him any, and were shouting
contradictory advice all the time, which only made playing harder. “We both just waited way too
long before asking any of the girls.” He huffed and sent forward one of the pieces shouting the
loudest. “If I could send a message back in time, I would advise myself to just ask Hermione the
first opportunity I got and be done with it.”

“Why ask Hermione? Weren’t you interested in Cho back then?” Ron asked trying to sound casual
and interested. But all the lessons over summer, and the last few days, even his stay with the
Slytherins at school had sharpened Harry’s senses and perception. Ron wasn’t calm at all, he was
tense, trying to conceal something. Envy or jealousy maybe?

“Because she would have been a safe choice. She’s like a sister to me, and I’m like a brother to her.
No expectations – she never would want a kiss from me – and no awkwardness, because we know
each other so well already,” Harry easily answered, keeping a close eye on Ron’s reaction.

Ron relaxed, grabbing a cookie from the plate Mrs. Weasley had sent up with them. “So why
didn’t you ask her to the balls that you had to attend over the holidays? Why go with that
Greengrass girl from our year?”

“Because she’s searching for a match. And going with me, someone with so much value on the
market,” Harry and Ron made a face of distaste, both of them didn’t really like the idea of arranged
marriages, “but also clearly someone who would never be a serious candidate, was going to get the
right kind of attention. And she asked me first.” Harry had explained this more than once already,
but could totally understand why his friends from Gryffindor tended to ask him again and again.
Marriage matches and contracts were things used mostly by the more conservative families. And
most of those didn’t have a lot of children in Gryffindor.

“All those lessons on dancing and manners…” Ron trailed off, clearly searching for words, and
sending forward a piece to slay one of Harry’s in an attempt to cover up his uneasiness. “Are they
helping any? With girls, I mean.”

Focusing unhappily on the board between them, Harry slowly answered his friend’s question.
“Knowing how to dance removes a little of the dread over potential humiliation. Also the standard
ways to ask help to have a starting point, kind of. Remember how we didn’t know how to ask?
Which words to even use? That’s better after the lessons. I guess.” Harry shrugged, trying to ignore
the shouting chess figurines to find a good move to make. Holding a conversation and playing a
game of chess at the same time wasn’t something that Harry was all that good at. “But Theo
pointed out something at the New Year’s Ball. As they – Draco, Theo and the others – have had
lessons with many of the girls their age from early on, the girls all have tons of blackmail material
on them. They know their weaknesses, and some of their more embarrassing moments. They both
agreed that it’s pretty horrible to even contemplate dating one of them.”

For a moment Ron looked surprised, than a look of horror crossed his face, and he paled, making
his freckles stand out clearly. “That’s a terrible situation! Having the girl you like knowing how
you were a stumbling idiot in dancing lessons. But you joined them much later. You like any one
of them?”

Harry shook his head. From the Slytherin girls, not one really had caught his eye. They were pretty
enough, but he was almost sure that he wanted someone not that tangled up in all those plots and
politics, not keeping up a mask around the clock, never really letting it down even in the common
room. Because all the girls third-year and up had a real tight grip on their poise even in the
common room. Lots of the boys did too, but somehow the standards for them weren’t as rigid in
some aspects. Not exactly fair, in Harry’s eyes. “No. I guess there’s just too much history, you know?”

“What about Cho? She’s not together with anyone as far as I know. Lavender said she’s really one of the few in sixth-year without a partner,” Ron asked next, throwing Harry a questioning glance.

Harry flinched a little, and rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. That was a minefield he would rather avoid. “She’s pretty, and she’s nice. But… with all that happened after the third task. Cedric dying… The rat did it, but… it’s complicated. Can’t see her really talking to me, now that I was adopted by the man who was brought back in a ritual right there next to Cedric’s body.” Even without the added complication of being Marvolo’s son, and the man having ordered the murder, Harry was sure Cho and he as a couple wouldn’t really have worked.

Ron hummed, nodding knowingly at Harry’s explanation. Harry frantically searched for a way to change the topic or switch the focus over to Ron, but his friend was faster. “Dad said that you were dancing with Luna Lovegood quite a lot at the ball.” Ron waggled his eyebrows, a grin on his face. “There are a lot of stories told about Ravenclaw girls. Always up for an experiment, Dean said.”

Harry felt himself blush. Really he shouldn’t have lent his book from Marvolo to all and sundry. Some of the others had really started to talk too much about such stuff for Harry’s liking. “Don’t be that way, Ron. I like that Luna simply doesn’t care about all my wealth, or that stupid celebrity thing everyone else seems to see before they see me. Luna’s just… easy to talk to, I guess.” Really, Harry just liked spending time with the younger Ravenclaw girl. She was happy and funny. It was easy to be with her, no need to keep himself in check all the time. And even the strange stuff in his life paled against the strange things she always had to tell.

“Do you think…” Ron started to ask, but then suddenly stopped speaking, blushing.

“Do I think, what?” Harry asked, interest sparked.

“Do you think, we should play something else? You’re not really paying attention. You’ll have lost in just three moves.” That clearly wasn’t what Ron had wanted to ask, but Harry wasn’t one to pry – he knew what it felt like to be asked stuff you didn’t want to talk about – and all too happy to accept a way out of this game of chess.

“Exploding Snap?” he offered, and Ron quickly agreed. After that their topic of conversation stayed on much safer ground, as Ron tried to get information on the Slytherin Quidditch team out of Harry, claiming that it wouldn’t hurt as Gryffindor and Slytherin weren’t to play against each other again this school year. Until the time Harry had to return home he laughingly declined and held off all of Ron’s attempts at information gathering.

oooOOooo

Sam sneezed. That damn dust was everywhere. It hadn’t been all that hard to find out where the old records from the closed-down conference centre had been stored. It had taken a little bit longer to get the owner of the storage facility to agree to open the storage unit and let Sam rummage around in the files and paperwork.

And while going through heaps of unrelated paperwork was a boring task, Sam was grateful for people with a tendency to hoard old files and forget they were paying for a storage unit each
month. If the one keeping the books at the company which had bought and liquidated the conference centre had kept up a little bit better, or if the one doing the liquidating had been more vigorous in getting rid of no-longer-needed stuff, there would have been much less for Sam to work with.

After more sneezes, and a few paper-cuts, Sam finally found a box with the right year on all the papers inside. He was getting closer. Now he only needed to find files from February in the mess that this was.

He snorted, and moved another box over to the table he was using. He felt that it would be harder than he would like to find what he was looking for. There was no order whatsoever in these files or the way the boxes were stacked into the storage unit.

A few hours later Sam cursed himself for being right. The boxes were so mixed that he feared he would have to look through each one in turn until he finally found what he was searching for.

It was still a few hours later when Sam finally found the box with the files of February 1981. He went through the loose papers until he found lists of names. Attendance lists, lists of people registering for specific talks and presentations. That’s what he had been looking for.

It took some more time to go down the list and find the name Moreau, Olivienne on a list for the talk about the decline in number of fishes in the North Sea. The name of the conference was listed too. It was something long, using words which Sam had trouble bringing into any context he could understand. But that really wasn’t all that important. He wanted to find the woman, not converse with her about the field she had studied at university.

And there it was, on a list of people who had entered into some kind of raffle: Olivienne Moreau, Sorbonne. If Samuel remembered correctly, that was the name of part of some University in Paris. It had been mentioned in History of Magic. And Sam only remembered it because that had been the one question that he couldn’t answer in his OWL test, which cost him the E he had hoped for.

With a grin on his face Sam flicked his wand into the familiar pattern of a copy charm, making himself a duplicate of the sheet he had found. Now he no longer had to search the whole world. Not even the whole of Paris. Only those that had been studying the oceans in February 1981 in Paris, France.

The whole endeavour was looking up.

“I think that everything is now sorted the best way possible, under the circumstances,” Cornelius stated with a tired sigh. Augusta simply nodded, because there was nothing more to say. Even Lord Slytherin looked tired. But they all had every reason to be tired. They had worked a long time to sort out a solution they were convinced would make it through the Wizengamot. In the end, all factions agreed that children were better off placed with a real family.

The hardest part had been defining which things would be assessed to declare someone a fit parent. Lord Slytherin had kept silent during that part of the conversation. He had even offered to step out of the office – they were using the Minister’s office for their meeting – so as to not be accused of influencing the decisions unduly.
“I agree. And once the January session comes around, we should be able to make the changes needed, to sort this better than it ever was.” Lord Slytherin pinched the bridge of his nose – as if trying to stave off a headache – before relaxing back into the plush armchair he was sitting in. “But we still need to decide who from each department will be the one responsible for their department’s part in the procedure.”

“I guess Mrs. Wisby is a good choice to oversee matters, coordinate everything. Even if there should be more adoptions for a while, the workload won’t be enough to keep several people occupied the whole year,” Cornelius repeated, not for the first time. The man was obsessed with keeping the budgets low.

“Having the actual work rotate between different members of the Aurors, the Administrative offices, and so on, will help keep the people on their toes. Routine won’t muddy the waters, and it’ll be possible to avoid someone assessing themselves for an adoption.” That had been a point Augusta had felt was really important. There was no way to make sure no one with influence would be prevented from using that to their advantage. But the requirements they had written into their proposal hopefully would appeal to people from all factions.

The ability to be able to provide all material needs for a child would resonate more with the wealthy – and conservative – families. The need to get a clearance from the Aurors for law-abiding behaviour most likely would resonate with the light-oriented members. At first Augusta had wanted to exclude a family if one member had broken the law, at least when it was something more serious than apparating without a license, or accidentally creating hybrid plants in your garden.

A pointed question of where they would draw the line from Lord Slytherin – Would in-laws count? Great-uncles? – made her realize that such a decision would be very subjective and bound to come under question. So they had written down that only direct guardians – so the one adopting and their spouse if one existed – needed to have clear files with the Aurors.

All in all, she was comfortable with what they had decided on.

“Anything new on who started this whole mess?” Lord Slytherin asked of Cornelius, who sighed but nodded.

“My assistant, Arthur Weasley’s son, is currently trying to find Susan Summers. She should be back at work after her holiday. He’ll bring her here.” Cornelius suddenly stopped speaking and turned towards the door to his office. “I guess he found her.”

There probably were wards on the door that informed Cornelius if someone was entering the room in front of his office. Following the Minister’s example, Augusta and Lord Slytherin turned to the door as well. The small wizard in charge of the Ministry quickly threw each of them a look with a silent question, and Lord Slytherin accepted immediately with a nod. Augusta hesitated a moment longer. Did she trust him to get the answers they wanted to have? Lord Slytherin obviously wanted the Minister to think that he was trusted. But Augusta had fewer scruples to appear demanding and was convinced that he might have troubles. But in the end, she now knew the name of the witch who had started the first changes. It would be relatively easy to ask her some questions herself later if Cornelius did bungle this first attempt.

So she nodded as well just moments before there was a knock on the door.

“Come in!” Cornelius called out, settling himself more comfortably into his chair. Augusta refilled her cup with tea, offering to refill Lord Slytherin’s cup as well with a silent gesture. The finely clothed wizard – he always wore clothes of fine quality, but not of the frivolous make some Lords
seemed to prefer – accepted with a slight inclination of his head, so Augusta was pouring tea into the cup he had levitated to her when the door opened.

“Minister, Madame Longbottom, Lord Slytherin,” the red-headed, lanky wizard greeted the people he obviously hadn’t expected to be there. A young witch was behind Weasley and looked a little nervous.

“Thank you, Mr. Weasley, for bringing Miss Summers here. I’ll ring if I need anything else.” With a little bow the assistant left, leaving Miss Summers behind.

“Miss Summers, please sit down.” Cornelius smiled his oiliest smile and made the poor girl even more nervous. Augusta refrained from rolling her eyes. She was here to listen, and listen she would do.

“Thank you, Minister.” She sat down, nervously smoothing her robes.

“It has come to my attention that you initiated changes to the adoption process and left for your holiday before the changes were completely implemented, leaving the people responsible for them in confusion.” So this was the angle Cornelius wanted to take. Not berating her for changing anything at all, but for the way she had gone about it.

“That was unfortunate,” Miss Summers agreed. “But it all went rather slow. But the system was so behind the time. The focus was on everything but the child. A monstrosity! When I read about Harry Potter’s adoption, I was outraged. The poor boy! Wasn’t even asked if he wanted to be adopted. I specifically asked Mrs. Wisby. She was so confused over why the child should have any say in something like this.” Miss Summers was talking herself into a frenzy – with her face and gestures, her whole body, showing her anger – not noting the expressions of careful blank politeness from her audience. And Cornelius let her talk. “And something like this, when it's been known for years – if not decades! – by now how important it is for a child to agree to an adoption. They can develop severe problems with the building of attachments if they are forced into something they aren’t comfortable with.”

Lord Slytherin briefly had something flickering over his face that had Augusta curious. Why would something inane like this have an effect on the powerful wizard with his excellent control over his emotions and facial expressions?

“It took me so long to find someone who would be even willing to listen! Only when I spoke with Madame Umbridge in an attempt to speak with you, Minister, did I finally find someone who was willing to listen.” She smiled sadly when she mentioned the vile woman who had deemed it acceptable to torture children in the name of discipline. Using a blood quill, of all the stupid things to do. “She agreed that the magical world was badly in need of updating the adoptions procedures, as it had been too long since they last had been adapted to new knowledge and the changing times. She didn’t inform you, Minister? She said you were too busy at that moment to talk with me, but I should go ahead and start implementing the changes, and she would inform you.” Miss Summers stopped with a hopeful smile, while Augusta and the two wizards had quickly exchanged a look.

Umbridge had used this idealistic young woman to instigate a change of the adoption policy which – in its old form – had allowed Tom Marvolo Riddle to adopt Harry Potter, which had led to him claiming the title of Lord Slytherin. And that had set things in motion which had been in direct opposition to what Umbridge had wanted to happen.

It all matched maybe a little too well.

“And when Dolores Umbridge later was put on trial over torturing students, and setting dementors
on innocents, you didn’t question this order?” Augusta had had enough. This girl was too gullible if she just followed her vision even after the woman endorsing it had been proven to be a criminal who endangered children.

Miss Summers blinked slowly as if she had run head-first into a wall. Augusta wasn’t sure, but felt that Miss Summers was maybe a little too naive for work in the Ministry. At least for any positions of real power. “No. Why should I? I knew that I was right. The changed rules for adoptions are in favour of the children. They will be protected and happier as a result. And the Minister was informed. If he had disagreed, he surely would have made his opinion known. Right, Minister?” The young woman turned from Augusta to the Minister, her expression searching for approval.

Cornelius had a look on his face as if he had eaten too many beans and now had trouble with his bowels. “I have the sad duty of informing you that I was never told about these changes, nor did I ever approve them. Your failure to follow the correct protocol has caused lots of unnecessary trouble.” He took a deep breath before he gave the now really pale witch a stern look. “I’ll have to ask your superiors to see how your performance in general is perceived. If you are lacking in other areas, the Ministry will do better without you.”

They all watched without any outward reaction as Cornelius dismissed the young woman and she went, clearly stunned and confused. Augusta felt for Miss Summers. Yes, she had caused a lot of problems with her blind enthusiasm. But her idealism was something that Augusta could understand and accept. Some people wanted to do good and were willing to put in the extra work to reach their goal. Sadly, good intentions were no protection against something not working out as it had been planned.

“Well, that wasn’t what I expected,” Lord Slytherin said into the short silence that had spread as soon as the door had closed behind Miss Summers. “It took Miss Summers a long time to get a start on all those changes, if Umbridge started this before she became a professor.”

“I wonder how she managed to change anything at all,” Cornelius mused, preparing himself a new cup of tea. “Not one of those that had to work with her on the changes are people who normally are accepting of changes. There’s no way that they would have worked with a nobody of an assistant.”

Both Augusta and Lord Slytherin agreed with silent nods. Most of the witches and wizards working for the Ministry were set in their ways, and only accepting of change when forced.

“It feels a little too convenient that she is so clearly the culprit for these unfortunate changes,” Augusta said slowly. But who would do this, now that Umbridge was out of the picture?

“I suspect we may have more problems with pushing our proposal through than we had thought.” Augusta had to concede that Lord Slytherin was probably right. There was someone else still at work here, and that someone was clearly in opposition to them.

Chapter End Notes

Some time ago someone commented that the therapy sessions were too awkward, and therefore not close to anything real. I have never been a participant in any therapy sessions, so I don’t know anything first-hand. But when I think about both Harry and Marvolo, they don’t strike me as people easily willing to talk about their feelings, thoughts, and their reasons for them. So I reason that the whole sessions are awkward because both of them are unhappy and generally not the most emotionally mature.
But that’s just me ;)

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Small Steps

Chapter Notes

Thank all of you for chiming in with your opinion and experiences with therapy. Only writing from your own experience limits what one can write about severely, so I don't do that, jumping into the unknown from time to time. The majority of comments seem to indicate that I haven't strayed too far from the realm of what's possible and believable. At the end of the day therapy is a deeply personal experience and I hope what I have come up with for Marvolo and Harry both matches what they can manage with their past and personalities.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday, 8th of January 1996

Standing near the door, only a few steps into the room, Aberforth watched as the healer passed out last instructions to his brother. He watched and wished to be back home, or really anywhere else. But being here was as much a duty as it was defiance.

Back when their mother died it would have been Albus' duty to push aside his wishes and care for their ill sister. Not planning world dominion as he had done.

And now here they were many years later, with reversed roles. Now it was Aberforth in the position of the one expected to care for his brother. And he was here to do exactly that. Maybe it would make the great Albus Dumbledore, defeater of Grindelwald – the travesty! – realise that his brother was an honourable wizard, and that he, the older, was in debt to Aberforth.

But that probably was too much to hope for.

"Keep in mind, Headmaster Dumbledore, you'll have to take your potions each day three times a day. Mr. Dumbledore I count on you to keep an eye on that." Aberforth nodded, not sure if he should be amused or annoyed over the way the healer had decided to distinguish between him and his brother.

"I'm sure we'll manage, Healer Jugson," Albus answered from where he was sitting on the bed, before Aberforth could. Always that need to be the centre of attention. It was grating on Aberforth's nerves. But on the other hand, he really wasn't keen to be in Albus' shoes.

"I'll make sure he takes his potions, Healer. I'll get Poppy Pomfrey to spell them into his stomach if he doesn't cooperate." And he planned to do exactly that if Albus planned on being difficult. He had made sure his brother got the help he had so obviously needed. He wouldn't allow all that work to go to waste now.

"If he doesn't take his potions willingly, or even tries to hide that he isn't taking them, bring him back here as fast as possible," the healer scolded in a tone that managed what no one had really been able to do since their mother had died. Aberforth felt chastised and nodded before he really had registered what the man had said.

As satisfying as force-feeding potions to Albus would be, getting him back into the hospital under
such circumstances was probably the wiser choice.

With an acknowledging nod the healer changed the topic of their discussion. "I have arranged for Madame Pomfrey to visit every other day to run a few scans. I expect to see you in two weeks' time for a checkup on how you're recovering." The young wizard looked stern, and again Aberforth felt reminded of their mother. Most of the time she had been a mild, polite witch, but under the right circumstances she had had the tendency to be as hard as a stone and as fierce as a nesting dragon. "But if there are problems you can come in any time."

"I'll keep that in mind," was all Aberforth could say to that. He took the remaining steps to stand next to his older brother. "Come, Albus, we need to go now. I can't close the pub for the whole day."

It was easy enough to get home and place Albus in the guest bedroom that never had been used before. Hopefully the old meddler would get better soon. Aberforth really would rather be far away from his brother again. But he doubted that he would get his old post as Headmaster of Hogwarts back after this incident.

Opening the door to the pub, Aberforth made a valiant effort to concentrate on the matter at hand: Providing drinks and the occasional meal to his patrons. Albus and his troubles would be still there at the end of the night.

oooOOooo

Tuesday, 9th of January 1996

Paying close attention, ready to act the moment it looked as if there might be a problem, Marvolo watched as Marcus coaxed the little snake out of her terrarium into a shallow bowl filled with slightly damp earth and moss. ::We'll clean your home. Put a few new things in. It's easier to do if you aren't in it::.

Both Henry and he were here to help Marcus in getting more confidence interacting with snakes. After all, it was likely that he would need to interact with a snake to prove that he indeed had the Slytherin's family gift of Parseltongue. Mr. London was sitting a little bit farther away, watching, and therefore a possible witness in the further adoption process.

He also was there as a school representative to make sure the young boy was all right while together with two almost-strangers.

Xerxes was playing it safe, and Marvolo had to agree. However much this playing by the rules – which were stupid in this case – irked him. It was the wiser choice in this instance.

::But I want to keep the nice stone, smallest speaker::: Slithering Darkness said, slowly moving over the edge of her enclosure. Henry snickered over the nickname the snake had given to Marcus, and Marvolo had to admit her way to make sure each of them knew without doubt to whom she was speaking was amusing. He wondered idly if she would continue to call him the tallest speaker should Henry grow to be taller than he.

Marcus looked up to Henry, a question clear in his eyes. ::I think we can manage that::: . Henry answered with a nod toward where the snake had started to burrow herself into the mixture of earth, rotting leaves, moss, and sand they had filled the bowl with. ::This is nice::. came a pleased little hiss from the snake, sending Marcus into peals of pleased laughter.

Taking the shallow bowl, now with the addition of a burrowing snake, from those small hands,
Marvolo set it down out of the way onto a table Marcus would be able to reach more easily.

Then he turned his attention to all the supplies they had gathered on a table nearby and then to Marcus and Henry. Both of them still needed to learn the trick required to speak Parseltongue without actively looking at a snake. This here was a good opportunity for them both to practice. .:Marcus, can you get the bucket? Henry, I want you to vanish the water from the small pool there in the corner:.:

Marcus carefully climbed down from the stepladder they had placed near the enclosure so the short boy had a better look into the terrarium, and then raced across the small distance towards the table with their supplies. Henry got his wand out, gave Marvolo a short look and then asked his face scrunched up in concentration ..:Am I allowed to try it with Parselmagic?:..

It should be simple enough, but to make sure that Henry was thinking in the right direction on how to word the spell he decided to ask before giving permission. "And what exactly would you ask your magic to do?"

To his credit Henry gave this question a moment's thought before answering. "I would ask the water in the small puddle to vanish."

"And where do you want it to vanish to?" Marvolo asked pointedly. He knew, of course, that vanishing spells were part of the fifth year curriculum, and that the spell itself didn't need the clear statement of where the vanished things went. He was pretty certain that Professor McGonagall would have explained – more than once, most likely – that things vanished in this way would go into non-being, or everything, a rather obscure way to explain the effect of the spell in his opinion. Parselmagic, in contrast, needed more precise directions spoken to work as you would wish it to work.

"Into the air?" Henry now clearly wasn't sure any longer if that was the right answer.

"You most likely would create mist that way. Not really what we want to have here." In that moment Marcus came back, carefully placing the empty bucket at Marvolo's feet before climbing back up the stepladder eagerly waiting what would be next.

..:You and I, Marcus will move all the earth into the bucket. I was told that it would be a great addition to the beds over by the greenhouses:. Marvolo said to Marcus, who nodded eagerly, before he turned towards his older son. ..:Use the spell you have been studying for most of your transfiguration classes this year. Maybe that'll help you to come up with an alternative wording:.:

It seemed as if Henry had accepted the fact that he was allowed to do magic while under the supervision of his guardian. Pointing his wand, Henry performed the spell not with perfection, but with confidence. "Evanesco!" The water inside the small pool vanished. With a small smile Henry turned from the terrarium towards Marvolo.

"That's neat!" Marcus called out, and judging by the small grin tucking at the corners of Henry's mouth, the teenager enjoyed the praise clear in the small child's tone.

"Yes, that was very well done." Praise given at the right moment was a great motivator. And looking back at the past, Henry could use a little praise from family. "Now can you tell me what you have learned about the theory behind this spell?"

The question didn't remove the smile from Henry's face, but a small furrow made an appearance
while he thought about the answer. "I know that we covered that in class." the boy muttered. "Something about becoming one with everything else?"

"Not too far off, but I recommend that you have another look at the theory here. Vanishing spells are likely to be part of your OWLs."

With a sigh and a nod, Henry started to wash the branches they had decided to add to the enclosure, while Marvolo levitated the stone Slithering Darkness wanted to keep out and over to where Henry was working, before he started to move the earth mixture into the bucket.

.:Can you tell me why we have brought sand that has been washed, Marcus?:. When they were doing this – cleaning up a terrarium – then he would use this to educate the younger members of his family in everything they needed to know to care for a snake.

.:Because it's cleaner, and has only round, smooth grains!:. Marcus exclaimed. They had spoken about all this before, while they had gathered the different things that they then had levitated here.

.:That's correct:. Marvolo answered with a smile. All in all, the indignity of cleaning like a common house elf could be borne when he got the opportunity to spend time with his son. Or rather his two sons. It might be better to get used to the idea of having another son early. In the end he would do whatever he needed to get custody of Marcus. So there was no danger of being disappointed if he worked on getting used to the new idea.

They had a lovely afternoon talking with Slithering Darkness, moving everything inside her home to the spots she wanted them to be in. By the end Henry had an easier time speaking the language of snakes without one at hand, but hadn't managed to come up with a good wording for the Parseltongue version of the vanishing spell. So Marvolo reminded his son once again never to experiment with that specific branch of magic without his supervision. "I'll promise not to experiment without asking you first," Henry finally interrupted Marvolo's rant, rolling his eyes. They both knew that this didn't cover all possible angles. But Marvolo let it slide. Happy that his son was using his long-dormant Slytherin cunning, and would be able to use it in a pinch if he was truly desperate.

To his own surprise Marvolo was slightly sad that Henry would be gone back to school soon.

oooOOooo

"Say again, Susan?" Sunny – known by her mother as Claire Vane – said to her friend sitting on the sagging two-seater in her minuscule flat, placing the two mugs of hot chocolate on the cluttered table next to the loveseat, perching herself close to her friend. She hadn't really managed to get the girl she had gone to school with to explain what exactly was wrong that she had come here crying her eyes out.

"I'm on probation!" Susan wailed, clutching the lone bright red pillow so hard her fingers turned white.

"On probation? Did you get a decent explanation why you were placed on probation?" Sunny nudged the mug a little closer to the miserable Susan. "And drink something, it'll make you feel better."

Releasing the pillow from her death grip, Susan took up the mug with shaking hands, blowing on the surface of the hot drink before taking a cautious sip.
For a few moments they sat in silence while Susan calmed down enough that an actual conversation would be possible.

"You know what I told you about the reforms of the adoption process I was working on?" Susan asked, getting a nod from Sunny. Her friend had been ecstatic over being trusted so early in her career with something that important. Susan snorted, sounding bitter. "It seems that Madame Umbridge did not, in fact, inform the Minister. So I worked on all this, worked late hours, without the Minister's knowledge or approval! And now he learned about it! And called me into his office! Lord Slytherin was there." Sunny watched in concern as her friend's composure once again started to fail, desperation creeping into her voice. "Lady Longbottom was there! And Weasley didn't warn me!" Susan set the mug down so she could place her face firmly in her hands, her next words muffled. "I thought they wanted to praise me. It's so mortifying!"

There was a lot that Sunny could have said to this revelation. She had tried to caution her friend, who was much too naive and passionate about her cause to heed the warning. Had tried to make Susan realize that there might be other intentions at play than the wish to improve adoptions and their outcome for the children affected.

In this moment the *I told you so* was on the tip of her tongue.

But that would have been cruel, more than cruel, as Susan had come here to find a sympathetic ear and some consolation, not mockery. Later Sunny could once again try to make an effort to let Susan realize that politics was a pond filled with grindylows, not crups.

Letting the lesson on politics rest, Sunny stood to get them a refill of hot chocolate. At the moment she would concentrate on being a good friend.

oooOOooo

With a sigh Sonja sank down on the loveseat in their quarters at Hogwarts. Severus sank down to her feet, nimble fingers opening the laces on her boots before removing them completely. "Thank you, my love, for a really great evening of visiting the opera and great Italian food." It had been the best birthday he had had since Lily and he had had their falling out during their OWL year. Maybe even better than any he had reluctantly celebrated as a child before Hogwarts.

"I'm happy you had a good evening, love. I think we both needed a break from the research." Sonja wiggled her toes and then tucked up her feet under one of the pillows. "We need to do this more often."

Severus laughed, getting up from the floor to sit next to his wife. "If I wasn't Head of House that might be possible. But I agree, venturing out into Muggle London more often is a good idea. Not being recognized and stopped for aimless chatter at every corner was a nice change of pace."

Sonja poked him lightly in the ribs with a finger, clearly amused. "That only happened at the functions, Severus. Don't get overly dramatic."

Severus rolled his eyes, and tucked her into the crock of his arm. "I haven't been to Diagon Alley yet. After I became the new Lord Prince and am no longer just the youngest Potions Master and former Death Eater, I estimate the number of people willing to speak with me has at least tripled."

They both snuggled down, Severus summoning their favourite woollen blanket from the place where it was stored. The fire crackled merrily, casting a nice red glow over the room.

"I had a thought on the potion for the family connection recognition," Sonja suddenly said into the
"During our date?" Severus snorted, they were so much alike.

She nodded. "When the bartender mixed our drinks." Severus felt a brow rise towards his hairline. "What if we make it a more-components potion?"

"Do go on." That was a new idea they hadn't explored before.

"Well, the problem, in essence, is a reaction between the elements breaking up the material added by the two people, and the bloodroot that is essential to the part that will bridge the gaps between generations. Right?" Severus nodded, exactly that was the problem. Not one of the volatile ingredients could be substituted, as there wasn't anything else that might give the needed effects, but wouldn't also carry the unwanted ones. In consequence Sonja and he had come to a grinding halt in the familial-relations-potion research.

"What if we changed the process and how we brew the potion? I think if each person involved with the test gets one dose of the potion designed to break apart the genetic information, swirl the potion in their mouth for a moment, and then the two are combined with the part analysing and comparing… that should make the combining actually possible without blowing the whole thing up. Or what do you think?"

Severus blinked a few times, slowly processing the idea that Sonja had come up with. Normally potions were easiest to described as one purpose, one potion. Giving several potions to reach one desired effect wasn't something usually done. Anything like that would be seen as a ritual in the current climate. But as there wouldn't be any blood involved it might just be accepted. "That's an idea we should pursue. It certainly would get rid of the explosion. We need to see if it'll still work with the staggered addition of the ingredients." He really wanted to go test it now. Or at least write up a new set of notes.

Slight chuckles from Sonja and her shaking with laughter made Severus look down to where she was curled into his side. "Go get the notes and bring along the chocolate. You won't be able to relax anyway when you try to keep yourself from working tonight."

She knew him so well. Only a few moments later they were curled back together, now with notes and books around them, working on Sonja's idea for how to get the potion to work.

This really was the best birthday in a long time.

oooOoooo

Wednesday, 10th of January 1996

With a tap of his wand Henry's trunk shrank down to a more manageable size. Today Henry would go back to school. In fact it was only under half an hour until the train would leave Kings Cross Station.

"Henry!" Where was the child? Only moments ago he had walked back up the stairs to get his cloak. Fetching a piece of clothing shouldn't take this long.

"Sorry!" was called from upstairs shortly before quick steps came down the stairs. "Nagini was complaining that she'll be mostly on her own again, now that I'll be back at school." Henry grinned and rolled his eyes. "I think you might need to spend more time with her. She's lonely."

Marvolo snorted, slinging his scarf around his neck. Nagini could be quite demanding. "She just
likes to complain. She'll be with me most of the time for the next few days. I have a lot of correspondence to work through."

"Why haven't you taken her to the Ministry yet?" Henry wanted to know, stepping before the mirror to adjust his clothes.

"Can you imagine the reaction if I walk into the Ministry with Nagini slung over my shoulders?" Marvolo asked, arching a brow.

Henry laughed out loud. "I would love to see that. I'm sure quite a lot of people would run. Maybe one would even pass out?" There was a big grin on Henry's face, making him look a lot like his father. With a pang of something Marvolo didn't want to think about, he shoved the pictures gleaned from memories of Death Eaters who had been to school with one of his staunch opponents back then, into the darker recesses of his mind. "I'm ready to leave," Henry stated, turning around to face Marvolo with obvious enthusiasm.

With a last look around Marvolo let Henry walk out the door in front of him. He just couldn't be one of the parents who needed to return home to fetch something left behind. When he had been a student at Hogwarts, some of the others in his year had been prone to forgetting stuff, making their parents apparate several times between the station and their home. It had made him look down on them back then, and still he had nothing good to say about such a lack of planning. With a shudder he realized that he heavily relied on Henry's being able to pack his own stuff, and that Marcus wouldn't be able to do the same for some time to come.

He would learn to work around that. He had managed to do so for some of his more… slow death Eaters. How hard could it be to do the same for a child he actually cared about?

"You do have everything?" Marvolo checked one last time as the door fell closed behind them and the wards came up.

"I checked thrice," Henry answered with a small smirk.

Wondering why his son would smirk when asked something so mundane, Marvolo offered his arm so he could apparate them to the station.

As usual Henry stumbled on their landing, but it was easy to help the teenager to stay upright as Marvolo had expected something like this to happen. There already were people bustling about, the train was standing with open doors, ready to take the children back to Scotland and the castle for the next term.

Henry was practically bouncing, looking around for his friends. But decorum demanded he stay by his father's side, and he managed to do so. If barely. "Run along and look for your friends," Marvolo said, astonished at the fondness in his voice. He hadn't tried to put it there on purpose. "I'll catch up with a few of the others." He wasn't actually sure if Henry saw him pointing at a few of his followers standing together a few paces further down the platform before the boy was gone.

With a chuckle – again trying not to pay too close attention to the feeling of fondness where he would have expected at least exasperation – Marvolo walked over to where three of his followers were gathered talking animatedly. "Xerxes, Benjamin, Lucius, nice to see you. I hadn't thought you would be here, Xerxes."

"Marvolo, how are you? Hermione and her parents were over for breakfast, so I apparated them here. It's so much easier than muggle transportation. Even if I have to say that sitting in one of those automobiles is an experience," Xerxes answered with a twinkle in his eyes. "Much less
jostling than the Knight Bus makes us believe, I would say."

Lucius clearly was surprised by that announcement. "You have used one of those… dangerous contraptions? I heard that they can explode, killing the people inside. There are so many better options for transport without using muggle means."

Marvolo chuckled again. "As if splinching, getting lost in the floo network, or failing charms high in the air, never happen." The way the current head of the Malfoy family paled because he had disagreed with his Lord, without really meaning to, only heightened Marvolo's good mood. It was a little too easy to tease the poor man. "The technology has improved since your own father had a good look at one of the early versions. And just as a competent witch or wizard will have no real problems with travel, one can learn how to operate one of those cars safely. Not that I have felt the need..." He let himself trail off, opening the floor for each of them to chime in with their opinion on what method of travel works best for what situation and what forms of muggle travel they had experienced before.

"I always wondered who decided to use a train to get all the students to Hogwarts. It's not like there are any other trains around exclusively used by magical folk," a female voice suddenly pitched in after Benjamin Nott had ended his story about one fishing trip from the back of a boat on a lake in the north of England.

As one the four of them turned to come face to face with Madame Amelia Bones wrapped up in a warm cloak and scarf, a pointed hat keeping her head warm.

Marvolo smiled. He was pretty sure someone as well read as Madame Bones would know this, as the addition of this method to arrive at Hogwarts had its own chapter in the easy-to-optain *Hogwarts: a History*. "If I remember correctly, the train was introduced by Minister Ottaline Gambol in 1827. She wanted to put an end to some of the more ridiculous ways students and their parents had chosen to use for travel to the school. I think the Muggles needed to be made forget what they had seen too often. How forcing everyone to travel to another spot so all children could board the train helped with that, I'm not sure." Marvolo shrugged while he watched Xerxes smirk, Lucius and Benjamin trying to look as if this was nothing new to them, and Amelia Bones rolling her eyes at his showing off.

"I think the fact that there are a lot of people coming and going at a train station, and there is floo access as well as a safe place to apparate to, helped with that goal." Madame Bones easily stepped into the small space in their circle that had opened with their turning to see who had spoken. "Susan tells me that the train ride is a great opportunity to catch up with friends. And I, too, remember the travel with fondness for exactly that reason."

Quick flashes of his own travels moved before Marvolo's inner eye. The first one, with his nervous anticipation of trouble and the eagerness to finally belong. During the war, when the news of destroyed tracks had made him doubt if the train would even go, if he might have to stay in London with bombs falling on the city. The constant political struggle. "I have varying memories of the train and the travel. But judging by the look on Henry's face just after we arrived here, the catching up with friends bit of the journey is one a lot of the children enjoy."

Madame Bones' eyes were far too sharp for Marvolo's comfort, watching his every move and expression. "If you'll excuse me, I want to properly say farewell to Henry." Only waiting the bare minimum not to be rude, Marvolo nodded to them all before he turned and walked out into the madness that was the platform just before the train was to leave. Children and adults standing or running around, trunks stacked and standing in the way all over the place, animals underfoot... it was madness.
He felt the eyes of at least one person on him but ignored it in favour of searching for his son.

Luckily it didn't take long for Marvolo to hear a call. "Here! I'm here, Marvolo!" For a short moment he felt irritation that Henry had disregarded his demand to be called father or sir in public. But then his common sense took over. With this many parents around, calling for father wouldn't have helped much, the title simply applied to too many wizards present.

So Marvolo turned to see where the call had come from, spotting his son standing in the door of a waggon a little further down the platform. He walked over, dodging other people, and at least two cats.

"You have found a compartment?"

Henry nodded. "Yes. It was easy enough. Theo had already laid claim to one." For a moment an uncomfortable silence descended between them. Henry played with the hem of his cloak, clearly nervous.

Determined to not make this any more awkward than it already was, Marvolo ignored the nervous fidgeting. "Keep up with your studies. Call on the mirror in the evening. Don't forget to keep in touch with your godfather, and please stay out of trouble." Marvolo was acutely aware how different this time was from the first he had brought Henry to the train.

Henry nodded, clearly intending to follow that demand, before he blurted out a request of his own. "Please tell Marcus that I would love to keep visiting. You'll keep visiting him, won't you?"

The imploring eyes, the not-quite-spoken command in that question, made Marvolo smile. It was good to see how willing Henry was to be an older brother. After all, it could have gone entirely differently, with Henry resenting any other child who might challenge his place as heir, or just as the sole focus of Marvolo's attempts to be a father. "I certainly plan to keep visiting him. And I will keep you up to date about the whole process of adoption. If it fits in with your schedule, maybe Marcus and I will call you on the mirror."

The shrill sound of the whistle cut through all the noise for a fraction of a moment. The warning that the train was to leave soon.

"Call when you're back in your room. Have a good time." Unsure of himself, Marvolo stepped a little closer, opening his arms in an attempt to offer a hug – because the few he had had so far had been nice, and wasn't that what parents did when bringing their child to the train? – he found himself in the arms of his son just a fraction of a second later.

"Don't work too much, entertain Nagini, and keep me in the loop, please." Henry said, somewhat muffled by the thick fabric of Marvolo's cloak.

"I'll do that." Giving the shoulder of his son a somewhat awkward pat, Marvolo stepped back as far as he could, prompting Henry into releasing him from the hug.

Henry moved away from the door, closing it behind himself.

Marvolo stayed standing close to the tracks on the platform waving for a moment as the train started to move. When a child of maybe nine or ten years of age almost ran him over, waving like mad, obviously trying to keep up with the train as long as possible, Marvolo scowled down at the little hooligan. With a high pitched squeak the kid ran, and Marvolo pinched the bridge of his nose. Maybe he should ask Lucius to duel with him. Purely for practice. Naturally.

With a clear plan in mind, Marvolo cast a last look after the train – it wasn't visible any longer –
and then turned on his heel apparating right back to Griffin House.

oooOOooo

It was odd to be equal parts happy to go back to school and sad that he was going back to school. Being back at Hogwarts with his friends was going to be great. But he would miss out on visiting with Marcus. Maybe they would be able to use the mirrors so Harry would be able to speak with him sometimes.

Not willing to stay in the corridor, Harry moved down to where Theo had found and commandeered a compartment for them. When he came to the door he saw that a few of the others had already found their place.

"Harry!" Astoria exclaimed when he slid the door to the side so he could get in. "There you are! Come over, sit down, and tell us everything about the small boy who will be your younger brother." Harry rolled his eyes sending Daphne into a fit of giggles, and sat down next to Daphne and across from Theo.

"Calm down, Astoria. There isn't much to tell. Marcus is a small child, still learning to read. He's a Parselmouth, and father and I have been spending time with him, so we could get to know each other." Harry opened his cloak so he wouldn't get overheated now that he was inside the train. He deliberately turned towards Theo. "How is Aiden doing? I know he's still too young for most of the functions, but I guess you still had the chance to spend plenty of time with him?"

Theo gave Harry a look that would have killed if that had been possible. His friend clearly had understood what Harry was trying to do with that question and wasn't impressed. Giving his friend an unapologetic shrug Harry watched Daphne and her younger sister turning towards Theo to pepper him with questions about his adopted younger brother.

They had been going for some time when the door to their compartment opened and Draco stepped in, already looking harried. "Can I seek shelter in here for a moment? I'm sure we never were as nerve-wracking as the firsties this year. How do they think I would know what homework to expect until the next holidays?" The blond's short but passionate rant interrupted the steady stream of questions Astoria had been asking – everything from Aiden's favoured food to the animal he liked best – and tore Harry away from his book. He had been reading the Potions text. With the end of the holiday, the extra lessons with Professor Snape would resume and he really would prefer to give the man no reason to be displeased. Irritating the Potions Master was a sure way to make learning from him almost impossible, even after Marvolo probably had threatened bodily harm to the man if he didn't cooperate, and failing might cause serious trouble for Snape.

And wasn't that irony, Harry learning Potions in an attempt to prevent one of his least favoured professors from being tortured. And for all that Harry knew, this wasn't even a valid concern any longer. Because someone as caring as Marvolo was to both him and Marcus – even with followers still – surely wouldn't torture a teacher over the lack of motivation in their student.

At least Harry was pretty sure that Marvolo was much saner than that.

Draco slumped into one of the empty seats, exhaling a long breath and visibly relaxing. "Luckily the meeting of all the prefects was rather shorter than the first one. Oh, and Granger and Weasley are on their way here as well. So we'll only have a few moments of quiet."

Harry chuckled. There was no way he could refute the claim that Hermione could talk a mile a minute once she got rolling. This tendency was barely tolerable after tests and exams, but great when it came to lesson revision.
And right on cue the door opened again to let in the two fifth-year Gryffindor prefects. "Here you are, Harry!" Hermione greeted a big smile on her face, which got even bigger the moment she spotted the Potions text Harry still held in his hands. "Doing revisions?" Her eyes narrowed playfully, her smile giving her away, "Who are you, and what have you done with my friend Harry?"

"Har, har, Hermione. It might be a new idea for you, but I'm aware that were in our OWL year, and father is serious about me doing good in school." It was a great motivator to have an adult who was interested in how well he did in his lessons. But if Hermione hadn't come to that conclusion herself, he wasn't about to tell her.

"I can only agree with Hermione," Ron spoke from behind their bushy-haired friend. "That's not like you. Studying on the train back to school." The red-head scoffed, stepping past Hermione – almost pushing her into Astoria who was sitting near the door – to sit down between Harry and Draco.

"Well, before this year, I never went anywhere during the school year, staying at Hogwarts. And this is our OWL year. Marks haven't been all that important before. And if you claim that I have no need to study for Potions, then I'll have to ask who you are." Throwing Ron a pointed look, Harry settled a little more into his seat at the window, placing a ribbon as a marker into the book.

Hermione sat down in a seat near the door, brown eyes sparkling, her prefect badge pinned to her Hogwarts robes she – naturally – already had changed into. "I wish I hadn't returned the time-turner after third year. I simply haven't enough time for everything I want to do!" The other Slytherins exchanged covert glances at this casual admittance of being favoured in such a way. They all remembered the unhappy rant they had all been treated to some time just before the holidays because a seventh-year had been disappointed by Professor Snape's declining the application for one.

"What, besides revision and homework, do you want to do so badly?" Harry asked, leaning forward in interest.

"Tiago and Teofilo have written a letter. They were hunting in the grasslands in the east of Argentina. Hunting and gathering. I really would love to research the magical community there. And the plants and animals that are to be found in the Pampas. The letter made me so curious. But I just can't fit in any time for research into my schedule without cutting into the time I have planned for homework, or revision." She huffed in frustration, and Harry had to fight hard to keep from laughing over the grimace Ron was making where Hermione wasn't able to see.

"Tiago and Teofilo. Those are the illegitimate sons of Lord Lestrange, aren't they?" Theo wanted to know, clearly happier now that he wasn't the sole focus of Astoria's curiosity.

Now Hermione's eyes narrowing had a much more threatening air. "What is your problem with them?" harry was pretty sure all of them thought that she probably expected someone to have a problem with them being born as the result of an affair, outside of marriage. But as Harry had learned in the many lessons over the summer, that men having children before marrying wasn't considered a problem. Much as it hadn't been in the muggle world either. Hopefully they would be able to steer clear of that mess, as it was a sure way to get Hermione ranting about inequality. Harry was pretty sure not one of them really wanted to hear about it on the way back to Hogwarts.

Theo shook his head. "Of course not. Just trying to confirm some of the rumours I've heard. Have they written something about what it's like being a supplier of wild, exotic potion ingredients?"

Now it was Theo who was leaning forward, eager to hear more. "Besides the stories about curse breakers working for Gringotts those about the daring individuals travelling to places at the edge of
the world were always my favourites. Is it really as exciting as the books make it sound?"

That took the wind out of Hermione's rant before it could really start, but prompted her into a
detailed recounting of the letter's content. Harry was only listened with one ear contemplating the
existence of stories about curse-breakers and travelling adventurers gathering stuff from various
exotic places and animals. Maybe he should ask his friend if there were a few books he could
borrow. Reading for relaxation wasn't something he had been able to do in the past.

The Dursleys never would have allowed him the time – nor had they encouraged such behaviour in
their own son – Ron only ever read quidditch magazines without Hermione's prompting, and
Hermione's idea of light reading… he wouldn't even go in that direction. But Theo probably was a
good source for actual light reading material of the non-educational variety.

After some time Draco left to do some more patrolling, closely followed by Astoria, who said she
wanted to go find some of her friends. But Harry grinned when he saw Daphne roll her eyes at her
sister's back. While Hermione and Theo still were discussing the economics of trade with potion
ingredients, with Ron valiantly trying to keep up and contribute, Harry turned towards Daphne with
a smile.

"Did you have any success with attracting a few possible suitors?" It wasn't exactly a polite
question to ask, but Harry thought that he could get away with it as a friend of hers who had helped
with getting her better odds at this game. If one could call the search for a future husband a game.

Daphne gave him a sharp look and a huff. "It certainly has attracted some. Not sure if I would call
any of them suitable suitors." She scrunched her nose at her terrible play on words, making Harry
chuckle. "Several are simply too old. Why should I marry a man thirty years my senior? Or even
older?" She shuddered. "But there have been letters from the continent. The fact that we were seen
together at more than one ball was reported in more than one newspaper outside of Britain. Father
will arrange for a few meetings over the upcoming holidays, and in the summer. Maybe I'll find
someone among them. Thanks for helping me out."

Harry smiled, once more immensely grateful that Marvolo had no plans to arrange a marriage for
him. "Thank you for your help in keeping me out of trouble and from embarrassing myself at one
of those balls. I'm pretty sure I would have managed to make a mess of it somehow."

They both laughed heartily over that, because after the disaster that had been the Yule Ball, it was
just too real a possibility.

The opening of the door didn't bring the lady with the sweets cart – as they all had expected – but
Luna Lovegood, who was smiling brightly, her wand tucked into a messy bun on top of her head, a
bunch of butterbeer corks strung onto a string hanging around her neck like a necklace. "Hello,
everyone." she said serenely into the room, before she stepped in, closed the door and walked over
to where Harry was sitting. "I really like the sketches you're making. Do you think you could make
one of them suitable suitors." She scrunch her nose at her terrible play on words, making Harry
chuckle. "Several are simply too old. Why should I marry a man thirty years my senior? Or even
older?" She shuddered. "But there have been letters from the continent. The fact that we were seen

As usual Luna didn't seem to noticed that everyone around them had stopped talking and now were
all staring at her. It was a skill Harry wished he could copy easily. "I never have drawn anything
from just a description." Harry answered, trying to turn her down politely. How should he draw an
illustration of something he didn't even think existed?

"Oh, I hadn't thought about that. It might be hard to get one of them to stay still long enough for
you to get a good look at it." Luna sank down next to Harry – Ron had moved to Draco's former
place some time ago so he was nearer to where Hermione was sitting – clearly thinking about the
problem. "But would you be willing to try? I'll do my best to describe them as accurately as I can manage. If it doesn't work out, then that's not too bad."

Harry blinked. A few years back, before Hogwarts, he hadn't thought unicorns or dragons were real, but had drawn them anyway. That is until Uncle Vernon had found and burned those pictures. How hard could it be?

"Sure. Let me get my sketchpad if you have time now?"

Luna nodded, her eyes staring out of the window – even though it already was dark outside – a small happy smile on her face.

Only a few moments later they were settled with Luna's feet in Harry's lap, which made him blush, to his intense mortification, working together on capturing the image of a Dabberblimp on the paper.

Judging by the smirk in Theo's eyes and on Ron's face, Harry was sure to get teased endlessly over this in the next days. Maybe even weeks. But sitting there, listening to Luna describing a curious, probably water-dwelling creature, sketching and with her so close, he was almost certain that it was worth all the teasing in the world.

oooOOooo

After some correspondence and preparations for travel into another country, Sam was now in Paris on his way to the official who hopefully would help him get the information he needed to find Olivienne Moreau.

Just in case – getting information wasn't all that easy when it could be used to track people down – Sam had arranged a persuasion fund in advance. It was filled to the brim, and Lord Black had said he was willing to fill it again if it was needed to get the job done. This was the first time that Sam had so many galleons at his disposal. It was somehow strange what a difference money made. He had known that this was a fact of life for some time now, but with the amount in that fund and how easily it was given… it had made him realize just how stacked the deck was against everyone not born into an obscenely rich family.

But before he would get out the big guns, there also was the story he had come up with. It was based mostly in fact, but he'd changed a few key points to make it seem as if he was searching for Olivienne because an old man who had talked with her at that conference was dying and wanted to give her lots of his money to enable the woman to further her studies of the oceans. Hopefully the promise of money for science would sway the bureaucrats to help.

Striding confidently – only few people would question someone about their right to be somewhere if they looked as if they knew what they were doing and were in a hurry – Sam walked into the building, nodding in greeting to the man stationed in a glass booth near the entrance, greeting another man walking towards the door with a polite "Bonsoir." Preparing himself, and his solid knowledge of French, to charm the information he needed out of whoever was responsible for this kind of stuff.

He was really glad he had accepted this job. It had been interesting so far, and the pay was good as well. Much better than searching for incriminating evidence of employees' stealing at work, or a spouse's cheating.

Quickly checking the paper with the directions he had been given, Sam turned a corner and started to peel off his coat. He was so close to finding her.
Chapter End Notes

Writing is a welcome reprieve from the real world for me. I hope I can offer a few of you something to distract yourself with when life gets too stressful. We all need distraction now and again.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Next chapter planned for 6th of July 2018
Thanks to your constant support I was able to keep writing even on days I didn’t feel all that inspired ;). Thank you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thursday, 11th of January 1996

“So, you have found her?” Sirius asked, his heart suddenly stuttering in his breast, hope rising. He had done his best to keep himself occupied, distracted from what was happening with the search for his twin daughters. But now with the wizard he had tasked with finding them and their mother standing – well, sitting – before him, he no longer could hide behind empty flirtations and the obligations of being Lord Black.

“It’s likely.” The man answered with a nod, accepting a cup of tea from Remus. “The file on her at the university in Paris points to her place of birth being on Martinique. That’s an island in the Caribbean that belongs to France. I went to the magistrate to check if I could get her current address, but it’ll take several weeks until I get an answer from them.”

Remus sat down on the last empty chair, placing one of the muffins Kreacher had made onto his plate, before sitting back to ask a question. Sirius was so glad his best friend was living in his house, helping him with all the difficult stuff. “And travelling over there will help find her quicker?”

Sam nodded again. “It’s usually easier to go directly to the source, so to speak, then relying on others to go through several layers of bureaucrats.”

Sirius took a muffin as well, slowly nodding. It probably was true, bureaucrats were a pest. “You think she still lives there?”

“And if she doesn’t, I probably can find family of hers, or friends. Which would help locate her.” Sam sounded confident, and Sirius had to agree that he had a point.

“Did you make a copy of the file?” Remus wanted to know. He always had been the most sensible of the four of them.

“I did.” With a flick of his wand Sam enlarged a small stack of paper he got out of his robe pocket, floating it over to where Sirius was sitting.

With a funny feeling in his guts – was he nervous? Surely not! – Sirius captured the floating file and opened it up so he could read it. “Marine Biology?” What could they even talk about when they would meet? It was bad enough that Sirius couldn’t remember a thing about that night. But that they would have nothing in common was just as bad. Wasn’t there a way that they could avoid meeting each other?

“Thank you, Sam, please start arranging everything you need to go to Martinique.” Remus
interjected while Sirius started to panic. “Either by plane or portkey is fine. I think the magical community isn’t all that big on the smaller Caribbean islands.”

Sam quickly finished his cup of tea and stood. “That’s probably true. Not enough magicals to warrant regular international portkeys. I’ll have to inquire when the next connection by portkey is available. But I guess by plane should be faster. I’ll send word once I know for sure when I’ll be travelling.”

And then the private investigator was gone, and Remus sat down next to Sirius, placing a calming hand on his shoulder. “Deep breaths, Sirius. You want to meet Nawel and Enora. And I’m sure Miss Moreau will be willing to tell you all about the girls you have missed. There alone is weeks of topics for conversation and a basis to build from to get to know her. You’ll be fine.”

“Will I? We don’t even know if she will allow contact between me and her daughters. And look here.” He gestured dramatically with the opened file in his hand. “She finished her dissertation. Despite the fact she had just become a mother! Can you imagine how that had to have been? Working on a dissertation and caring for two babies?” Sirius shook his head. That sounded almost impossible to manage for him. It had been hard to comprehend how James and Lily had managed to be parents to one child, together!

“That certainly wasn’t easy, I give you that. But there is no need to panic before Olivienne is even found. You managed to successfully complete Auror training. You’re now working to bring order back to the assets of the Black family, and on top of that you’re working in the government. I’m not sure how it happened,” Remus teased, “but you’re an adult now.”

To a claim such as this, there was only one possible reaction. Sirius gave his friend an unimpressed look and then cast a charm at Remus that would have turned his hair bright blue, if the infuriating man hadn’t managed to dodge it.

It engendered a duel through the whole house between Sirius and Remus, using only prank spells. It worked wonders to clear Sirius’ head from gloomy thoughts, and ended with them both coloured in odd combinations, with hair standing on end and their voices sounding decidedly off.

The day ended on a happy note. Pranks and silliness were simply what Sirius needed in big doses at least once a week.

oooOOooo

Sunday, 14th of January 1996

“Have you taken your potion, Albus?” Aberforth stood in the door to his own small kitchen and patiently asked the question for the third time. Just as he had done every morning, noon, and evening since his brother had been released from the hospital.

Looking very much distracted, Albus finally looked up from the book he was reading, turning a little so he could make eye contact with the very much annoyed Aberforth. There was no way he could be paid enough to put up with his older brother. And he wasn’t being paid at all!

“I’m sorry, did you say something?” Albus smiled his charming grandfather smile, and Aberforth
had the sudden urge to go open a new bottle of the strongest firewhiskey he had in the bar.

“Yes, Albus. I did say something.” He did not sound as calm as he would have liked. “Have you
taken your potion?” Enunciating each word as clearly and slowly as he did whenever one of his
patrons got a little more drinking in than was properly wise.

“I did take my potion. You gave it to me with the plate of scrambled eggs.” Now Albus sounded as
if Aberforth was the one not paying attention.

Aberforth rolled his eyes and walked over to where he had stored the potions. “It’s noon, Albus.
Time for another dose. Do I need to feed it to you? Or did you just get lost in a book again?”

Aberforth couldn’t see his brother’s expression, with his back turned, while he got out another
phial of the potion from behind the wards he had set.

“I have to confess I greatly enjoy having the time to catch up on my reading. It’s something I didn’t
really get to do the last few decades. I’ll take the potion and then will call one of the Hogwarts
elves to provide us with some food.”

Aberforth didn’t comment on Albus’ continued insistence on getting food from the Hogwarts
kitchens, instead checking on the wards he had put up mostly so he would know if his older brother
tried to tamper with the potions he needed to take. So far everything was fine. He did indeed seem
to get better from day to day. Maybe come February Aberforth would be alone again.

Setting down the phial on the table next to his brother, Aberforth gruffly turned around to leave
again. “I’ll have to check on my stores, see what I need to order more of. I’ll be back for food.”
Seeing that Albus was recovering was good. But at the same time Aberforth wished his brother
would show a little remorse for his actions. It probably had been too much to hope for from the
beginning.

ooooOoooo

Wednesday, 17th of January 1996

They’d been back at school for barely a week, and Harry felt in need of holidays again.

OWL year was intense.

With a slight *umpf*, and the sound of a heavy object placed down on the floor, Harry sat his bag
down next to the table his group had claimed in the common room to study. The girls had objected
against using the boys’ dorm for further study. Pansy had claimed that they never did clean their
room. Harry wasn’t really sure if that was accurate – he strongly suspected the elves cleaned under
the mess with magic – but no one had been in the mood to argue with Pansy.

So their study group was meeting in the common room. After the seventh years had admonished
the younger students to please refrain from speaking above a whisper just at the beginning of the
week, it was much quieter in here than in the library. Add the fact that there was no fear of losing
face before students from any other House, it seemed that the Slytherins actually preferred to study
here in what could be called privacy.
Sometimes one just needed to express the frustration of trying to remember all those details about a plant, or the names of all the many moons of Saturn.

Without prompting Theo moved over to make room for Harry. “What did Weasley want?”

“He was playing owl for the twins.” Harry answered, diving under the table to get out his cards with dates of various important points in history. “I think he wants to save up some money for the next Hogsmeade weekend, and the twins make a joke out of it.” Harry tossed the scrap of parchment that had been sealed when Ron had handed it over, waiting for Harry after his last day of classes, over to Theo. The slender boy caught it with ease, his eyes then moving quickly over the short text.

After a snort Theo tossed the note back, managing to make it land first on Harry’s head before it fell down to come to rest on the floor next to where Harry still was searching for his notes. “Must have been like living among doxies, growing up with those two as brothers.”

Harry nodded distractedly. The twins basically had only told him that their market research was going well and that they simply loved sending their brother around for no reason at all. Remembering the story about the transfigured teddy bear, Harry hummed in agreement. “From what they’ve told me, and what their family tells, they were right horrors. Ahh! There they are!” Finally successful, Harry emerged from his quest to settle back into the pillows stacked on their seats.

Draco was deeply entranced in his notes a few seats over, Daphne was patiently explaining something to Vincent and Gregory, who both had the expressions on their faces that Harry associated with them concentrating. Most of the others were either rewriting their notes or reading various textbooks. This time between the last lesson and dinner quickly had become time for either homework to be finished, or revision, quietly in their common room, sometimes in the library taking advantage of Hermione’s extensive notes and reference list.

Both activities had taken over every moment of spare time they had. It was taxing. Harry had decided to use the Friday Defence club meetings to work on his practical defence, reducing the needed preparation by a lot. It didn’t bring him any actual free time, as the Slytherin Quidditch team was still insisting that he help them train.

With a resigned sigh – there was no way Marvolo would allow him to slack off – Harry turned the cards so the names of battles, treaties and stuff was facing him and started on his attempt to remember as many dates as he could.

Their table descended into the silence of concentration, only disturbed twice by younger students creeping by on the way to their dorms, and Harry distractedly placed the cards either on his left or right depending on whether he had remembered them correctly or not.

“Harry, I think your bag is buzzing.” Theo said, eyes trained on a diagram of a half-section of some plant stem.

“My bag is buzzing?” Which year had it been that Albert Boot had resigned as Minister for Magic in the aftermath of a goblin rebellion?

An elbow to the side startled Harry enough to make him take note of the world around him. Theo gave no indication that he had been the one wielding that sharp, pointy elbow, but Harry had no time to complain about that because the buzzing was indeed coming from his bag.

Marvolo was calling on the mirror!
Only seconds later – history notes forgotten on the table – Harry was heading for his room, mirror in hand, accepting the call. “Sorry, was studying and didn’t notice the mirror right away.” Harry said by way of a greeting, only to startle when a high pitched giggle reached his ear.

“You have ink on your nose!” Two faces were grinning out of the mirror, bringing a smile to Harry’s face.

“Thanks for pointing that out. I’ll have to wash it off before I go to dinner. Remind me?” Harry reached his room and walked over to the desk. “Here, Marcus, I put the picture you sent me up next to my desk! I had to ask around to get a little Spell-O-Tape. If I remember, I’ll buy a roll when we get to go to the village the next time.”

“Look, Marvolo! There it is! Harry put it right there next to his desk!” Harry shared a moment of fond exasperation as Marcus obviously felt the need to repeat what just had been said for Marvolo, who had heard everything anyway. They both had noticed that tendency while they had cleaned out the snake enclosure. It seemed to be something pretty normal for the kid.

“And I see that there’s lots more empty space right there next to the picture of .:Slithering Darkness:. Maybe Nagini will be willing to pose for another picture?” Marvolo suggested, using the Parseltongue version of the snake’s name.

With an excited shout and no parting words, Marcus vanished from the mirror – Marvolo’s flinch indicating that he might have hurt the man in some way in his enthusiasm – and only his running steps could be heard as he moved away from where Marvolo was still sitting.

“I think it’s almost certain that you’ll get a new picture soon,” Marvolo said with a smile. “How’s school?”

“Exhausting,” Harry answered with feeling, walking over to his bed to sit down heavily. “I didn’t notice before, but I have to repeat, fifth year is really hard. And I mean it! Really, really hard. And what I can see of the seventh years, NEWTs aren’t any easier. I have no idea how anyone was willing to enter that blasted tournament of their own free will while also preparing to take those exams. It’s madness!”

Harry gave Marvolo a half-hearted glare as the man had the audacity to actually chuckle. “Keep an eye out for the trade in illegal and mostly fraudulent offers of mind-enhancing substances that surely will start up soon enough. At least there was a market for that stuff back when I was a prefect. Dragon claw was sought out frequently. I’m still appalled that it was so easy to sell basically chalk dust or powdered sugar, claiming it was powdered dragon claw. I’m sure that many a busy entrepreneur managed to make a pretty Knut with such trades.”

“Does that actually work?” Harry sighed, leaning back against one of the posts of his bed. He would forego his scheduled reading of his transfiguration notes today in favour of a little more sleep.

“If it’s real powdered dragon claw it does. But that would be cheating, which is forbidden, and in all three years of being involved with the prefects at Hogwarts there never was any actual powdered dragon claw confiscated. So, don’t risk it, Henry.”

“Hadn’t planned on it. But I’m sure Hermione will have a little breakdown once the trading starts. She still doesn’t approve of the twins’ selling of prank products, and their tests with various volunteers.” Harry smiled a fond smile. Hermione and her love of rules could be infuriating at times. But that she had bent, or broken, those rules for him in the past only made her friendship that much more precious. What had she said back in first year? They could have been killed, or
“Go eat something, Henry. And then go to bed, you look as if you haven’t slept at all since going back to Hogwarts.” There was actual concern in Marvolo’s voice, Harry was pretty sure of it. “Did you have trouble sleeping? Odd dreams? Out of place feelings?”

Now Harry sat up straighter with surprise. Why would Marvolo inquire after symptoms of their odd connection bleeding through again? “No, nothing of the kind. Just too much homework, panicky friends, and long hours studying. And Professor Snape checked my shields first weekend back. He said they were adequate, but there was still a lot of room for improvement.” Harry tried for a fair impersonation of Snape, only earning himself an eye roll. “Did you have troubles?” The question was out before Harry’s mind could catch up with his mouth. He had asked out of concern, but it was too easily interpreted as Harry doubting Marvolo’s capability to maintain strong shields around his mind. It probably wasn’t the best idea to go around questioning the wizard’s ability.

“No, I didn’t have problems. But I haven’t slept as much as I should either. Flimm has taken to starting to clean where I can see him when it’s getting really late. I never noticed before how passive-aggressive house-elves can be if they think their masters are being unreasonable.” Marvolo smiled again. “I wanted to remind you that the January Wizengamot session is soon. We’ll bring in the changes to the adoption laws and procedures, just to give you a heads up. I think we should be successful. Too many from different blocs agree with us. But one never should be too sure. Now, you go eat dinner, and I’ll check in on Marcus and Nagini. It looks as if one of the other kids might be taking an interest in what Marcus is drawing. Have a good evening and see you tomorrow!”

The mirror suddenly only showed fabric – probably Marvolo’s robes – and Harry could hear Marvolo asking someone what they were doing. Deciding that he should indeed go to have dinner, Harry ended the call, slipping the mirror into one of his robe pockets.

It wasn’t long until the weekend, and at least then he would have the opportunity to sleep a little. It sounded like heaven. Having a room to himself had definite advantages in that respect. No early risers to disrupt his sleep.

Humming to himself, Harry returned to the common room where he gathered the others around him so everyone would get a decent meal before returning to homework and revision.

oooOOooo

Thursday, 18th of January 1996

It had been a successful breakfast meeting. In preparation for the Wizengamot session the next day, Marvolo and his allies in this particular matter had met at Nott House to work out what they needed to do on the next day to achieve their goals.

It had been a rather unusual gathering. Beside his usual allies – Lucius and his political following, Xerxes, Benjamin and the others – Madame Longbottom had been there, bringing quite a few of her friends. One of them Black, who had made sure Marvolo knew that he was still watching what went on at Griffin House and whenever Marvolo interacted with the public. It had been amusing for a few moments.
There had also been others who usually were to be found in the groups labelled light and grey, or sometimes neutral and liberal, willing to listen why they proposed the changes they were about to introduce.

The Minister had been absent, as had Madame Bones, but in the end it was better not to show their hand too soon. That two of the most important members of the Wizengamot because of their position in the Ministry were on their side wasn’t something that they needed to be talked about widely before it became obvious during the session.

They still hadn’t managed to find who had cleared roadblocks for Miss Summers so the disastrous, half-baked changes to the adoption procedures could have been enacted. And as long as they hadn’t found whoever had taken over from that pink cow Dolores Umbridge, they couldn’t really look out for where the attempts to hinder them might come from.

Marvolo walked at Xerxes’ side until the old wizard had to take another path up to the building which held the offices, teachers’ lounge and other such rooms. He had to finish up some paperwork as he had explained before, and now parted only with a nod to his Lord and friend.

Marvolo himself had come by because he wanted to visit Marcus. It was early still, so the child would be in school. But at this age quite a bit of the day was spent with crafts, games, or story time. Xerxes had been sure that Marvolo would be welcome to read the students a story – Marvolo was sure he hadn’t imagined the humour in Xerxes’ eyes – and had sent a note to the school before the meeting had started.

Seeing the young Marcus without Henry around was different, but just as he had promised his son, and as he had promised himself, he wouldn’t be scared away by the unknown. If he could confidently make an old ritual work without complete information, which hadn’t been performed successfully in hundreds of years, he could manage to do something people all around the world did every day.

He would be a father to the best of his abilities.

When Marvolo stepped into the classroom where Marcus and the other kids his age where sitting, all the children were colouring something. Or maybe drawing. It was hard to say from where he stood, trying to catch the eye of the teacher who currently was crouching next to a kid, probably explaining something.

So Marvolo walked over to have a better look over the room, searching the bowed heads for Marcus, finding him moments later, looking unhappily down onto the picture before him. Marvolo felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth. Marcus looked kind of cute – just as small cats did – with a frown on his face.

In the wake of that thought came a wave of horror. How could it have happened that he, the Dark Lord, thought something or someone looked cute?

He took a deep breath.

The last returned piece of soul had once again brought another piece of humanity back to him. It really wasn’t as dramatic a change as he had experienced after the ritual giving him a body. But the small things still managed to startle him.

Marvolo was brought out of his thoughts by the teacher coming over to him with a smile on her face. “Lord Slytherin, welcome! The children are drawing their favourite animals at the moment. I want to include stories and information on them over the next few weeks. After that a bit of playing
in the yard is planned.” She was speaking hurriedly, or maybe she always talked at that speed. Marvolo wasn’t sure he cared either way. “After that will be lunch. Are you willing to help me keep an eye on the children during playtime and lunch?”

Marvolo really would have liked to spend time with Marcus alone, as the other children weren’t all that important to him. But he supposed that wasn’t something that charming, young Lord Slytherin could say out loud. He had to appear as the young wizard willing to be social with everyone if he wanted to get Marcus into his family. “I have no prior experience with keeping so many children safe at the same time. But I’m certainly willing to help you out.” Best to make sure the woman knew he had no real clue how to handle a bunch of young kids. Surely keeping bloodthirsty adults in line didn’t count as previous experience for this?

“You won’t be alone with them, Lord Slytherin. So I see no possible problems.”

If he had been superstitious, her assurance would have fit really well in that moment, because from where the children were sitting a stirring of wild, raw magic caught Marvolo’s attention.

“Give me the green one!”

“No!”

“But I need it! NOW!”

“I had it first!”

“You've had it too long!”

“I need it this long!”

Two children were arguing about something. And they were getting agitated enough that at least one of them had started to let their magic lose. With a worried frown the teacher started to walk over quickly, already speaking while she approached. “What is the matter here? There's no need to shout. You know the rules. If there's a disagreement, we inform an adult.”

Marvolo refrained from scoffing. He remembered well enough that informing an adult would be considered tattling, and those who tattled were not well received by the others. If one wanted to fit in, you either learned to resolve problems quietly, got others to just do as you asked, or always gave in.

Maybe that wasn’t the way it always was, but nothing he had seen or heard since his own childhood in the company of too many children and too few caring adults, had led him to believe his view was anything but right.

While the situation was steadily sliding into total chaos, Marvolo noted that Marcus was the child who desperately wanted the green pencil – or was it a crayon? – and the other seemed to be an equally stubborn girl.

“No you don’t!”

“Do! I’m drawing a dragon! A Welsh Green! See, they’re green!” She seemed obviously smug with her deduction, and convinced that she was safe with that.

Marcus did not seem inclined to let it go this easily, and grabbed to take the pencil from the girls hand. “I’ve waited long enough! I’m working on a snake, I need the green too!”
Before the teacher had managed to squeeze through the group of other children who had turned to watch and didn’t really listen to her demanding they make room, magic exploded out from the two fighting children, blowing papers and drawings into the air, pencils flying around, paper ripping.

It was a mess, and on instinct Marvolo let his magic rush out to suspend all the flying objects in the air. The image of a pencil burrowed in a kid vividly painted itself in his mind.

Gently lowering the art supplies to the floor, Marvolo wondered which of the children was responsible for this strong display of accidental magic. And while he contemplated the ramifications of someone so young displaying such a strongly destructive magical force at such a common thing as simple frustration, the teacher was berating Marcus.

“That was naughty of you, Marcus! Attacking another like that! You’ll stay here with Lord Slytherin, cleaning up the mess you made, while the others get to play outside in the snow. And you’ll apologize for all the pictures you have destroyed after you’re done! No dessert for you today.” Without even asking Marvolo if he was agreeable to watching over the punishment she just ushered the other children out of the classroom leaving Marvolo alone with a Marcus who was sitting rigidly in his small chair, his small hands balled into fists, and his face turned towards the ground.

Marvolo sighed. That was oddly familiar. Maybe the teacher had seen something he didn’t, but at the moment Marvolo couldn’t have told if the girl or Marcus had caused the mayhem. And even if Marcus had not reacted the best way to his frustration over having to wait so long, the girl hadn’t helped at all in defusing the situation. Putting the blame solely on Marcus seemed rash to Marvolo.

He carefully walked over to where Marcus was still sitting, lowering himself onto the much-too-small chair next to the young wizard. “Are you hurt, Marcus?” Marvolo hoped that the teacher would look the other children over while they were outside. He was reasonably sure that he had caught everything in time. Before the flying objects could hurt anyone, but he wasn’t sure.

As the only reaction he got from Marcus was the boy's turning away a little bit more, stiffening his posture, Marvolo sighed again.

This would be anything but easy. With all the practice he had in manipulating people by promising them what they thought they wanted, he wasn’t really prepared for a situation like this.

What had he wished to get when he had been this young? Harassed by the other children, experiencing accidental magic?

Marvolo noticed the picture Marcus had worked on still was on the desk, unharmed. “What are you drawing, Marcus?” First step: get the child out of the pouting and general uncooperative mood.

“Nagini,” Was the mumbled reply.

Nodding solemnly, Marvolo moved a little closer, surveying the picture. “I certainly can see the resemblance.” And he did. It also explained why Marcus had been in need of the green pencil the girl next to him had been using. “Do you want to finish it, before we start picking everything up?”

Marcus gave a tentative nod, relaxing a little. With an over dramatic wave of his hand, Marvolo made the pencils all over the room hover up into the air, forming a line so they could dance over to them. Eyes round with wonder, Marcus lost the last traces of his defensive body posture. “I don’t think any of those pencils have the right green to match Nagini’s scales. What do you say?” Maybe he would be able to point out better ways to get what one wanted than just exploding the whole room. Marvolo wondered what would have been different if he had been shown different avenues
to get what he wanted besides brute force and thievery. He certainly had learned that if you were willing to do what was needed, you could get whatever you wanted. But the finer points of manipulation, or simply working inside the rules, had been things he had learned much too late.

“That one is close.” Marcus pointed to one of the pencils, the only dark green. It was the only one even close to a Welsh green as well, and probably the one the confrontation had been about.

“Well, why use second best, when we have magic?” Marcus looked sceptical, but Marvolo didn’t let himself be deterred by that. Step two: showing other ways to solve the problem. It didn’t cost him but a moment of concentration to change the colour of the lead inside one light blue pencil to the exact shade of Nagini’s scales. This kind of colour changing wasn’t all that hard to do. But normally Marvolo didn’t often have a reason to do so. “Use this one. I can turn it back once you have finished.”

Marcus eagerly took the pencil and started to fill in the scales on the snake he had drawn. While the boy was occupied with that activity, Marvolo looked around to inspect the damage done. There were a few pieces of paper strewn around which obviously had been drawn on. Most likely they were the remains of pictures destroyed in the wave of magic. If they could manage to gather the right pieces a *Reparo* might be able to restore the images enough to make them presentable again.

“Look!” Marcus got Marvolo’s attention by shoving the picture almost in his face. So Marvolo took the picture and carefully held it at a distance where looking at it was more feasible. “That’s a good drawing of Nagini. I’m sure she’ll be pleased to learn that you regard her as your favourite animal.” It looked as if Marvolo had managed to sufficiently distract the child, now they should start cleaning everything up. “Let’s pack the pencils back into their cases. And then we’ll gather the picture pieces. Do you like puzzles?”

Bringing the cleanup – the punishment – back to the boy’s attention his face clouded over like a storm brewing. But he did as he had been told. Maybe there was more at work than simple resentment against being punished unfairly. Because Marvolo was sure Marcus felt unfairly punished. Was he working with Marvolo so easily because he was willing to go to great lengths to ensure the continued goodwill of an adult looking into adopting him? Or did he resent that particular teacher? Either way, Marvolo would have to speak with Xerxes before he could leave. For one thing, he wanted to make the suggestion to have two people in each class at all times. It would be safer to have a wizard or witch with good reflexes in each class to prevent harm when accidental magic got volatile enough to cause harm.

And then he needed to find out if Marcus was prone to violent displays of magic, and if the teachers always were so quick to judge the guilt of one child over another.

“Well done, Marcus.” A big pile of torn and shredded paper now was resting on one of the tables. “Let’s sort which pieces belong together and then I’ll try to repair them with magic.” Not all that eager Marcus started sorting, but quickly got more enthusiastic. It seemed a jigsaw puzzle would be a good idea for a present.

It didn’t take all that long to fix the pictures that had been damaged, so Marvolo helped Marcus into his cloak, as it was clear looking through a window that the other children still were playing in the snow. “Don’t forget your scarf, hat, and mittens, Marcus!” The boy, who had been almost to the door turned and ran back, seemingly unable to stand still while Marvolo bundled him up for playing in the cold. Once Marvolo had applied a warming charm for good measure, he followed the running child outside at a more sedate pace.

“I hope you didn’t clean up all by yourself, Lord Slytherin.” The teacher’s tone held a hint of a reprimand, at which Marvolo felt his hackles rise.
His answer accordingly was almost painfully polite. “Of course not. I helped him realize that there are better ways to solve such a situation with magic, which would make force unnecessary. He gathered the paper, and sorted it, so I could repair the images.” Before the teacher could react – probably with a rant defending her teaching approach – Marvolo injected the question he really wanted to know the answer to. “Is this the first time Marcus has had such a violent outburst of magic?” If it had been, it would only be more urgent to find the time to show the boy how to direct his magic into more productive avenues. The parenting books he had read all said the same thing about frustration and how children learned to cope with it. If they didn’t find good ways to work with frustrating situations, they would get into trouble a lot in later years.

From his own observations, especially of himself, adding magic into the mix, good coping mechanisms were essential to avoid some of the more dangerous pitfalls. Henry seemed to have turned to sports and avoidance prior to his start with therapy. Marvolo himself had turned to torture and vengeance and now had to work hard to find other ways. It would be best for Marcus to let him find something better now, than forcing him to relearn later in life.

Friday, 19th of January 1996

The Headmaster’s office looked exactly as it had done the day the old man had been forced to go to St. Mungo’s, Severus noted when he came in to confirm once again with Minerva, who was acting in her capacity as Deputy Headmistress, how Sonja would take over his classes for the day. It wasn’t really that surprising that she would display her loyalty to the old manipulator in such an obvious way.

On second glance, one might see a hint of Slytherin underhandedness in her refusal to allow any of her own things to be visible in the office. She didn’t need to remind visitors that she was standing in for the actual Headmaster when the office looked like he could walk in any moment.

“Looking forward to spending the day in the company of distinguished adults instead of the dunderheads you would have to put up with otherwise?” Minerva asked with an impish smile on her face, setting her quill down.

Severus rolled his eyes – he wished – and drawled in answer. “I’m not sure bickering politicians are an improvement over teenagers not paying attention in the potions classroom.”

That made Minerva chuckle. “Well, I’m sure you’ll manage to enjoy your day spent not teaching. And I only heard positive things from the students over your lovely wife teaching about ingredient freshness and storage. I’m sure her lessons will be well received today as well.” Severus refrained from commenting, only giving a short nod.

“I should be back by dinner. But if the session runs longer, Septima already agreed to keep an eye on my Slytherins this evening.” It felt odd that he was going to be somewhere else than the classroom on a normal Friday during term. But it was important that he attend this session. It was only his second one, and the matter they wanted to pass today was important to his Lord.

And to himself. Seeing what some muggle-born children suffered, leading to their never getting
their acceptance letters. Opening up the way for young, suffering witches and wizards to find a home in their world felt really important. It was great if the muggle parents were as supportive as Miss Granger’s, Heiress Lestrange’s, parents were. But sadly that wasn’t always the case.

“Do you want to use the floo in the office here?” Minerva offered. “You won’t need to walk all the way down and out of the wards that way.”

Already having said his farewells with Sonja, and wearing the pretentious robes he had acquired after he had claimed the title of Lord Prince, Severus nodded. “Thank you, that would be helpful indeed.”

“Go on then, Lord Prince, I’ll see you in the evening.” As she knew how little he loved the political bickering, there was a slight teasing tone in her voice, prompting Severus to repay her in kind with a smirk on his face.

“I wish you the time to make a dent in the stack of parchment waiting for your attention.” Minerva huffed at that jab, waving him away with an imperious gesture. They both enjoyed their banter which they had gotten new fodder for with the positions they both had found themselves in this past year.

Getting a pinch of floo powder from the jar, Severus threw it down, stepped into the green flames, and called out his destination. “Ministry of Magic!” He was sure this would be a long day.

ooOoo

Augusta had decided to be early, coming alone, as she did every time since she had taken the position as regent for her grandson and now regent for the Potter seat. She had made sure on the last weekend to meet with Harry to get a feeling for what he wanted to happen with his own vote this session.

Not surprisingly, he had fervently argued in favour of the changes to the adoption process they had worked on with the Minister since Lord Slytherin had stumbled upon the mess Miss Summer had made of it. The boy’s stance on werewolf rights hadn’t changed – no surprise there either – and after she had explained the few changes on import taxes and regulations for the import of common potions ingredients, he had tentatively agreed with her stance that dragon products needed to have some parchments for verification that they hadn’t been hunted from the wild, but harvested at one of the reserves.

She was satisfied to see that he didn’t just go along with what she suggested, but had asked for how that should be set up and controlled. If they actually made it to that part of the agenda, Augusta would have to bring forward the suggestion to include something like that into the law before they could vote on it in her capacity as the Potter regent.

“Augusta, good morning my dear.” Elphias slowly walked over to her, smiling kindly. They had a habit of talking with one another before the sessions. And they had lots of time to do so.

“Elphias, how are you this fine day?” It had been raining, temperatures just above the freezing point, when she had left the Manor, but these pleasantries were nothing but pretence anyway.

“Needs must, needs must, I’m sure you know only too well, my dear.” He spoke in a way Augusta remembered well from her own grandmother, words picked to play down the problems age
brought, but the voice asking for soothing words and pity to be heaped onto the one speaking.

She had refused to give her grandmother such when she had been just out of school, and she wasn’t about to give it to someone insinuating that she would have to suffer from stiff joints and constant aches as well, therefore knowing what he was speaking of. “Getting old isn’t for the faint of heart,” she simply offered before changing the topic, “Have you heard from Albus? Last I was told, he was going to stay with his brother for the rest of his convalescence.”

Doge wasn’t all that happy with her brushing off his attempt to gain some sympathy – what had he expected calling her old? – but jumped at the opportunity to talk about his good friend.

Only listening with half her attention, Augusta watched as a group of Lords – well, mostly Lords – came in, drawing the attention of most of those already in attendance. There in the middle and slightly to the front of the group walked Lord Slytherin. As always in the signature green and silver colours of his house. He was talking with Lord Lestrange at his side, and around them were Lord Malfoy, Lord Nott, the newly installed Lord Yaxley – from one of the lower houses – and Lord Greengrass. After them the stream of people arriving didn’t stop. There was the new Lord Prince. She never would have thought that the small runt in Slytherin from James’ year would turn out to be such an imposing figure. Just one more proof that, given enough effort, everyone had the potential to rise above their origins.

“Let’s settle down,” Augusta interrupted Elphias’ rambling about the books he was going to bring with him on his next visit to Dumbledore. “Seems as if everyone will be on time for a change.”

And indeed the benches were filling rather quickly, even the number of plum coloured robes indicating that most of the Ministry-appointed members were already here.

Doge looked around, surprised by her rude interruption. “Seems that way.” He nodded. “Well then, let’s see how this year will start.” With another nod in her direction, he walked off to find his own seat.

Augusta cast a cushioning charm on her bench of carved flowers before she sat down. This was going to be interesting.

But first the announcements. Abbott called the room to attention, causing everyone to fall into a hushed silence. After he had called Lord Yaxley forward to give his oath, Abbott turned to a list of notices one of the scribes had handed him. “Before we come to the agenda for today, let me inform you of a few important items of interest.” He unfurled the short list – Augusta thought that it was unusually short – and started to read from the top. “The wizards responsible for the abduction and torture of three witches last year, were sentenced to life in Azkaban.” There wasn’t really a reaction to that. Some of them had been in that trial and the news had been in the Prophet right after the day the sentence had been announced. “Suggestions for the cause of the annual spring fundraiser should be handed in before the end of February.” The scroll snapped shut with a sharp sound the moment the Chief Warlock released the bottom edge. “Is there anyone else who needs to make an announcement?” He waited a breath, looking around the room “No? Well, then let’s start with a motion to change the laws governing adoptions brought in by Minister Fudge. Minister, if you will.”

“Thank you, Chief Warlock.” The Minister rose from his seat, giving a small bow to the head of the Wizengamot. “As we have seen a rise in the number of adoptions since the past summer, it has come to the Ministry’s attention that the procedures were in severe need of an update. A first attempt to do so within the confines of the current laws proved unsuccessful, so my advisers and I have come up with the following changes to the law.” A flick of the wand and Arthur’s middle son was sending out copies of the law they had been working on for the past weeks. Augusta caught
the copy sent to her and unfurled it. Her grandfather had always told the story of the one ancestor of his who had been swindled into supporting a law going against his direct interests by changing what was actually written in it between negotiations and the actual passing in the Wizengamot. It had been a good lesson to ingrain in her the habit of always reading anything she was supposed to sign or vote on just before she did so.

The Minister gave them all a moment to read before he started on his explanation of what exactly the changes were. “As you can see, the best interest of the child to be adopted is still the most important concern.” Cornelius started on his speech, sticking to the highlights just as they had decided was the best approach. As Augusta already knew what the law was about and how they thought it should work, she let her eyes roam over the assembly. They still didn’t know who had been the one behind the scenes, pulling the strings so that Miss Summers could enact all those half-baked measures. This was their opportunity to watch all those Lords and Ladies who might have been involved.

To be effective, the Wizengamot chambers had been split into several segments, each containing a few individuals, each of them watching only those individuals in their assigned section. She had picked the section of the Ministry bench where all the Department Heads were seated. The Minister hadn’t openly communicated the work that was going on, but rumours always happened. And as Percival Weasley had been involved, Augusta wasn’t surprised that Arthur only nodded when he read over the proposal. Most others had known that adoption procedures would be a topic today – not everyone made a habit of reading the agenda before a session – but from all those in Augusta’s portion of the hall, Amos Diggory was the one person showing the most obvious displeased reaction.

During the discussion picking up after Cornelius had finished with his presentation of the new law, Augusta divided her attention between what everyone said and Amos’ reaction to what was said.

When Griselda Marchbanks asked one of the questions they had expected, Augusta saw Amos nodding with a grim expression. “This sounds as if it would make it possible to take children away from their muggle parents. Surely you can’t want that?”

“May I point you to the clause we specifically added to prevent that exact scenario from occurring?” Cornelius answered with a charming smile, clearly agreeing with her that this was a concern that needed to be addressed. “Here under the definition of what an unsuitable guardian is, it clearly is stated as point a, let me quote, ‘the lack of personal ability to wield magic never can be grounds for being declared an unfit guardian’. Just because the parents of a child are Squibs or Muggles, there is no cause to remove the child from their custody.”

There was more back and forth, questions digging deeper, people trying to find the edges of the rules, questioning the viability of the procedures they were proposing be put into place. And all the time Augusta watched the face of Amos Diggory getting darker and darker. He obviously wasn’t happy with the way this was going.

But why was Amos so set against children in need of a family being adopted? As long as Augusta had known him, he had been in Albus’ corner, or at least close to it. One of the few supporters the old Headmaster had had in the Department for the Regulations and Control of Magical Creatures. Sure, he had been dealt a hard blow when his son had died in the third task of the Tournament… her thought process came to a sudden halt.

Was that possible? Could it really be that?

Was Amos Diggory so grief stricken that he would do anything to get revenge on who he had to see as the one who killed his son? Was Amos against children’s being adopted, just because Lord
Slytherin was advocating for such adoptions to take place?

It seemed petty. But then she herself still had trouble speaking to Xerxes Lestrange for any length of time, because he had always been adamant about not disowning his sons. It was no longer that important with the death of those two after their escape from the prison. But she could understand holding a grudge. And she had held one for many years against the father of those responsible. Lord Slytherin was in many ways still the wizard they all had fought against. So working against him for what a Death Eater had done… she could understand that. But she still thought – hoped, really – that she never would have condoned the suffering of children in the name of revenge.

Augusta offered no arguments or questions during the debate, closely watching Amos, sneaking short glances to the others in her section. After all, his being upset about the changes of laws hundreds of years old, was no proof that he had been involved in the manipulations which had made the changes necessary in the first place. There might still be others involved.

Finally the Chief Warlock called for a vote. “Those of you in favour of the law light your wands.” Augusta held her wand high, as did all of those allied with Lord Slytherin – they had managed to overcome their wariness around the man since he had first claimed his title – and a lot of those who hadn’t been in on the plan from the beginning. If Augusta was right, those clearly were more than half of their numbers.

“Those against enacting the changes proposed, please light your wands now.” Amos was among the first to raise his glowing wand. Only a few others followed his example. As Lord Slytherin had promised, his allies had worked hard to make those most conservative dark families realize that it was a good idea to include those young wizards and witches into their families, and into their culture early on. Augusta wasn’t sure she could trust their motivation.

“Those that don’t want to decide either way, please light your wands now.” Since Abbott had become chief Warlock, changing the question for abstaining members slightly, the number of those had dropped quite a bit.

“With a clear majority the law brought forward by the Minister has been accepted. The Wizengamot instructs the Ministry to enact the changes needed to make the necessary adaptations.” The gavel came down with a loud bang. “The Wizengamot will break for tea. Session resumes in a quarter of an hour.”

With a sigh Augusta rose from her bench. This was a good opportunity to let the others know that she suspected Amos Diggory might be behind, or at least involved in, the framing of Miss Summers. Maybe one of the others had made another observation that she needed to know about. Working together with such a large group of people was beneficial, but probably short-lived. There weren’t that many topics it was so easy to agree on.

Augusta reached the break room, selected a small cucumber sandwich from one of the floating trays, and let herself drift over to where Amelia was standing, talking with Lord Slytherin.

oooOOooo

Saturday, 20th of January 1996
Coming to the Caribbean was a real blessing after the dreary January weather in France and England. After searching the records of births in the year 1959 – luckily there only were a few hospitals on the island, and the city of birth had been listed in the files of the university – Sam was now walking through one of the smaller settlements in the centre south of the island.

He hadn’t been able to get the address of Olivienne Moreau’s own home, but asking an older man owning a small odds and ends shop in the centre of the nearest town had given him an address for the woman’s mother.

As he was walking down the street, greeting the curious neighbours looking over from their windows or gardens, he looked out for the house which he had been directed to. Sam didn’t feel bothered by the interest of the locals. As a man obviously from Europe so far from the usual tourist haunts, he was bound to be noticed.

A few more minutes down the steep street Sam came to the house, painted in bright colours and sitting in a small but neat garden. Taking a deep breath he opened the small gate in the fence and walked up to the front door to knock.

“Un moment, s’il vous plait!” was called not from inside the house, but from the garden out of sight of where Sam was standing. He scolded himself, there really wasn’t a reason to be this nervous. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t prepared a good story to explain his presence and why he was searching for Olivienne Moreau.

A woman emerged from around the corner of the house. She wore shorts, a loose blouse of some delicate fabric, and a straw hat on top of her unbound hair. She would fit what he knew of Olivienne Moreau – African ancestry, mid thirties – but that applied to a lot of women he had meet since the airplane had touched down on the island. “Bonjour. Qui êtes-vous?”

“Bonjour. Je me présente, Samuel Jacobs. Est-ce bien le domicile de la famille Moreau?” Sam really was glad that he had taken the time to learn a few different languages. Translation spells were known to fail when local dialects, accents, and the like came into play. And they did nothing that would help him speak the language.

But seeing as the woman switched over to an accented English once she had heard him speak, his accent probably was worse than he had realised. “It is, Mr. Jacobs. My mother is in the garden. If you’ll follow me.”

What a coincident! It seemed he would need to deliver his news earlier than he had expected. But his only task had been to find her and establish communication. Everything else would be Lord Black’s job. Sam decided to pay attention to both women’s reactions and actions to maybe make the whole easier on his employer. This was going to be interesting.

Chapter End Notes

I know, it’s a mean place to end the chapter, but I wanted to give what comes next a proper stage ;) And this chapter was filled already.
Here are the translations for the few phrases used earlier in the chapter:
One moment! - Un moment, s’il vous plait!
Hello, who are you?” - Bonjour. Qui êtes-vous?
“Hello, my name is Samuel Jacobs. Is this the residence of the Moreau family? - Bonjour. Je me présente, Samuel Jacobs. Est-ce bien le domicile de la famille
Moreau?

Thanks to DiagonAlleyParis for the help with the French translation.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Saturday, 20th of January 1996

Sam was pretty nervous while he followed the woman who had identified herself as the daughter of the woman living in the house known as the residence of the family by the name of Moreau.

He didn’t really know if Olivienne Moreau had a sister, but he thought it unlikely that this woman was anyone but the one he had been searching for.

“I’m searching for an Olivienne Moreau who was in London in February 1981, my search led me here. Have I found who I’ve been searching for?” There really wasn’t a reason to drag this out. In his experience people tended to react with suspicion if one took too long to explain why he was there, especially if it was necessary to tell the truth at some point. He had heard of others inventing stuff at a first meeting, only to be made a fool once the truth needed to be revealed.

“You were searching for me?” She seemed surprised, but quickly turned to an older woman – her tight curly hair turning grey in a few places – introducing Sam with a few quick sentences in French, before waving her hand at one of the empty garden chairs. “Sit, and explain!”

So Sam did exactly that. He sat down and, folding his hands in his lap, took a deep breath.

How best to begin?

“I take it that you have been in London in ’81, studied marine biology, attending a conference there and meeting a young man – dark hair, grey eyes, pale skin, lean, mostly leather clothes – in a bar. Ending up being intimate together?” It felt awkward talking about a one-night stand with the mother of the woman who had taken part sitting right there, listening attentively, and not knowing if she could understand what he was saying or not.

“He introduced himself as Sirius. I tried to get hold of him when I realized I was pregnant, but I never managed.” She nodded, her attention sharpening, as if she herself was assessing what to tell Sam and what not to tell him.
“That was my client, then.” Sam nodded, smiling, at least he had that confirmed. “You wouldn’t have been able to find him. He kept hidden rather well.” All Aurors had had good warding… well, at least those that survived for longer than a few months after the attacks by Death Eaters had started in earnest.

His gaze flicked over to the mother, the way she was focused on the conversation, Sam was pretty sure she understood most, if not all, of what they were saying. Could he risk mentioning magic? In a way he would need to. How else could he explain why Sirius Black had known to search for her now, of all times?

Well, better start slow. “You said you searched for him when you noticed you were pregnant. I assume you are a mother to a child turning fifteen sometime this year then?” After all he really couldn’t explain how he was certain she was a mother of twins. Not without also revealing the existence of magic to two muggles he didn’t know at all. If the twins had no magic of their own, this family would be in the dark about it, and he would be violating the Statute of Secrecy if he told them.

Maybe he should have prepared himself to meet his target here. And the fact that the woman wasn’t as forthcoming with information as he had expected her to be wasn’t helping him any, either.

She nodded, caution clear in her whole posture. “I am. But why do you want to know?”

There wasn’t really a way back, so Sam moved forward. “Did you notice anything inexplicable happening around the child? For instance, when it was distressed, or bored?”

A short burst of laughter erupted from the woman, a lot of the tension going out of her. “Oh, mon Dieu! Stop pussyfooting around! You’re trying to ask if my child has magic!” Her question came out more like an exclamation but with a sigh of relief Sam nodded.

That was promising.

“Are you a wizard, Mr. Jacobs?” Her question was pointed. She was a terrifying woman. And her mother wasn’t any better. Her stare certainly was able to drill a hole into his head. So he only managed another weak nod, while the older woman threw in a comment from the side.

“Ainsi donc, le père de mes deux beautés est un sorcier?”

“Tais-toi, Maman! Laisse le parler.” Miss Moreau waved her hand impatiently at her mother, her eyes firmly locked onto Sam, who tried to gather his wits. “I hope you have an explanation.”

Sam took her next impatient hand-wave as his prompt to speak, and so he spoke. “You probably know of the war that was going on in the magical part of Britain at the time?” She gave a short nod of confirmation. “It ended in the same year at the beginning of November. My client, Sirius Orion Black, was accused of several crimes and tossed into jail without a proper trial in the wake of the confusion and chaos after the leader of the Death Eaters had been… incapacitated.” Because killed was so obviously not what had happened to the man now once again walking around. “Late the past summer, new evidence was provided, the lack of a trial discovered, and the unjust imprisonment ended.” Sam had a captive audience of two and was pretty sure those were the two most frightening women he had ever met. “He was set free and subsequently claimed his family assets, including a seat on the Wizengamot for the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black. He moved into the old family house in London, and started with renovations.”

Sam paused for a moment to give Miss Moreau a chance to ask questions, but another impatient
hand wave prompted him to continue speaking. “Over Christmas, an ancient family heirloom – a
tapestry displaying the family tree of the Black family – was repaired and suddenly was showing
much more than before. That’s how my client learned of the fact that he had twin daughters by the
names of Nawel Lyra Moreau and Enora Libra Moreau. With not much more information than
their date of birth, their names, as well as yours, and an idea in which clubs he had been during the
window of probable conception,” Sam felt his ears and cheeks flush what was probably a bright
red, going by the almost gagging laugh of the grandmother of the two kids he had just named,
“Lord Black hired me to investigate and find you and your daughters, Miss Moreau.” Deciding that
he didn’t need to recount the way he had taken to find her here, Sam made a small “and that’s
that” motion with his hand. “So you see, Lord Black had no way of knowing of your daughters’
existence, nor any means to contact you before I managed to track you down.”

“Tiens compte que quoi que ce monsieur puisse te proposer. Si c’est un Lord, c’est qu’il a de
l’argent!” Mrs. Moreau spoke up, standing from her chair. “Je vais nous chercher quelque chose à
boire.” She picked up the tray with an empty glass pitcher and two glasses and started on her way
back to the house.

Miss Moreau tapped her finger against her lip, dark eyes taking in Sam, who had the inexplicable
need to fidget. If he hadn’t known any better, he would have sworn that she had an intimidation
ward or something on the garden. “I don’t remember Sirius as the caring type, eager to be a father,
or one to take on any responsibility.” She paused, raising a brow. “What prompted him to search us
out now?”

If Sam had to sort this woman – as all alumni of Hogwarts tended to do with strangers anyway – he
would have placed her in Slytherin in that moment. “You’re right. Lord Black doesn’t want to
marry. But he needs an heir or heiress, and society is pressuring him to marry and make sure that
there is one. He wanted to check if he already had a kid before letting himself be… tied down in
that manner.” Sugar coating anything wouldn’t work on her anyway, so why lie?

“So he wants to take my girls from me?” There was a dangerous edge to her voice, making Sam
quickly deny her question with a shake of his head.

“Nothing of the sort. There is no need for the girls to be separated from you, or to relocate. As far
as I know. My task was to find you and establish a line of communication.” Only now did he
realize that he had no idea if there were any special rules regarding the living situation or education
of a Black heir or heiress.

“Heiress to what, exactly?”

“The whole estate, including several houses, money, old artefacts, the seat on the Wizengamot. But
I’m not entirely sure to what sum exactly that amounts.” He knew of course that the Black family
had a lot of wealth and had been bigger, meaning that all that wealth that had been spread out
between the different members now mostly was back with the main estate. But it wouldn’t be wise
to speculate.

“I want to meet with Sirius before he can meet the girls. And it’s their decision if they want to meet
him at all. They are currently away at school, but I’ll send a letter. I suggest you inform Sirius that
you have found me, and what my stipulations are. I’ll give you the address for my own home.
Meet me there the day after tomorrow. We’ll see what Sirius has to say for himself.”

And so Sam was thrown out – more or less politely – before he could get something to eat. But he
guessed that was probably for the best. He needed to inform Lord Black and get a little more
information on what Lord Black was offering and expecting.
And after he had written and sent his letter, he would find a nice section of beach, or a bar with good cocktails, and have a good evening.

ooOoo

Ever since one of her mother’s friends had told her that her toddlers had magic, Olivienne’s world hadn’t been quite the same. Since then she had suspected that the mysterious, talented – at least in bed – Sirius no-last-name had been a wizard and the girls had inherited their gift from him. Why else should she find herself unable to locate a grown man in London? And such a striking figure at that.

The explanation the wizard detective had given was plausible. Or as plausible as anything ever was in the world of magic. The old witch who was friends with her mother had started to teach the twins early, mostly in the magic native to the islands in this part of the world, and not the *modern nonsense* with wands and so on that they taught at schools now. So she and her mother had protective spells around their homes, linked to a few pieces of jewellery to inform them of danger and the intent of visitors, and to enable them to activate certain other features that had been included.

Remembering the unease she had felt from the wizard earlier, Olivienne smiled. It was always good to remind magic-wielding men that she wasn’t powerless or easy to cow. Judging by the fidgeting she had seen earlier, that had worked out rather well.

Accepting a glass of fresh lemonade from her mother, Olivienne sat down at her table and started to write a letter to her twins. Nawel and Enora would be interested to learn that their father had finally turned up. Maybe they would insist on a test to prove that he indeed was their father. They tended to be demanding when it concerned the validity of any information they were given.

Maybe she should have informed Mr. Jacobs that she wanted a paternity test. But in the end she easily could inform him or Sirius later.

In quick efficient sentences Olivienne wrote down everything she had learned today, before adding what had happened in her life since she had sent the last letter. She would pass it on the her mother’s friend – she only ever had called her tante –, who would use the floo to get it over to the small magical centre in Fort-de-France where it would be placed into the bags transferred over to mainland France each day, from where an owl – of all things – would take the letter to Beauxbatons.

Her girls were accepted there. Not once had they heard a slur based on the colour of their skin, the thigh curls of their hair, or the fact that they had been born on Martinique. It seemed that prejudices in the magical world mostly were directed at those from a non-magical background, or any other background that was considered deficient in intellect or culture. Olivienne wasn’t sure if being the daughters of a British Lord would be good or bad for their chances in their world.

Probably only time would tell.

oooOo00o
They had found a nice alcove in the library to spend a little time away from all their friends, who were either engrossed in their revision, or working on homework, when they had left.

Luna was sitting on the floor, her legs crossed before her, her head bent over some strange floppy strands of… something – strings probably was the best way to describe the objects – braiding, while Harry had sat down on the padded bench in the window, drawing.

Since he had received and read the book on how to animate simple drawings, Harry had wanted to try it. But there had not really been time. Now he had to draw a Bowtruckle for Care of Magical Creatures and intended to make it an animated drawing. Something simple, like the creature turning around and around – something repeating seamlessly should be the easiest, according to the book – showing both the front and back, as well as the sides.

If nothing else, this was going to help him remember how this funny tree-dweller looked.

Soft steps followed by the clearing of a throat draw Harry’s attention away from where he was trying to get the left leg right. He looked up, and there was Neville, all bundled up and smiling a little sheepishly. “I was sent by the twins to get you. And Luna. There’s a big inter-house snowball fight in the making down at the pitch. Ron is ecstatic, Hermione insists on being some kind of supervisor… please come down. It’ll be more fun if you’re there too!”

Harry would have loved to continue his drawing, but it was likely that there wouldn’t be snow all that much longer, so using this fairly sunny day for something other than doing homework and revision seemed like a good idea.

And the others obviously had thought the same.

“I’ll need to put my stuff away and get my cloak, mittens, and so on.” He turned his gaze to Luna, who was still sitting on the floor, smiling up to him with the calm demeanour she almost always had, and just answered in her dreamy voice. “I’ll put this away, get my warm clothes, and meet you at the great doors in fifteen minutes.”

Looking over to Neville, Harry smiled. “That’s settled, then. Please tell the others we’ll be down as quickly as possible.” He heard Neville quickly moving away while he gathered up his supplies.

“It’s fun having actual friends.” Luna said as if it wasn’t one of the saddest things anyone could say. But Harry understood only too well, and simply nodded with a smile, holding his hand out so he could help Luna get up from the floor.

They both picked up their things and parted ways at the stairs, where Luna had to go up to reach Ravenclaw tower, and Harry had to go down to the dungeons. For a moment it felt as if they should do something, but the moment was gone before Harry could really grasp what he felt he wanted to do, and he just smiled at Luna before going down the stairs.

oooOOooo

Monday, 22nd of January 1996

Xerxes had pondered how best to approach this meeting. It wasn’t exactly easy. On the one hand
he had to do what was best for the school, making sure his teachers knew that he had faith in them and their abilities. On the other hand, he had to do what his Lord wanted, especially when it came to the child his friend and Lord wanted to adopt as soon as possible.

So he had delayed the meeting until this day, using the fact that it had been a weekend and that there had been the Wizengamot session to make Marvolo agree to let it rest this long.

But now he sat here in his office, waiting for both the teacher – the near-Squib Matilda Moors – and Marvolo.

Hopefully Marvolo had cooled down a bit from the first time he had stormed into Xerxes’ office demanding action against a teacher unfairly accusing Marcus of violence.

He went to a lot of work to set up the meeting in an environment that hopefully would contribute to a relaxed atmosphere. His greatest fear for this was that the teacher might take this as an attempt to cow her or something along those lines.

To prevent that, he had carefully selected three identical armchairs, had arranged them around a table big enough to hold cups and snacks for them all and still allow room for writing, and had ordered some food he knew both his guests would like.

There was a knock at the door. Hopefully this would be Mrs. Moors, as Xerxes had asked her to be here earlier than he had asked Marvolo to arrive. “Enter!” he called out, moving in the direction of the door to further reduce the intimidation factor. The door opened. “Mrs. Moors, do come in! Would you prefer tea or coffee?”

The woman blinked several times, before she got her bearings back. Maybe she had expected a different reception. “Tea would be nice.” Maybe Xerxes had overdone the friendly bit. He probably was more nervous than he had realized if he was making such errors. Under normal circumstances he had more composure than that.

They both settled into the chairs, where Xerxes used several levitation charms to get the tea into their cups, and the cream and sugar where they needed to go. After he was finished with that. He had nothing more he could use to stall, and had to call himself to order sharply.

He should prepare the teacher for what this meeting was about before Marvolo arrived.

“Mrs. Moors, as I told you before, this meeting is intended to find a better way to handle the classes with younger children. After Lord Slytherin came to me with the story of how the squabble over a pencil turned into a dangerous tornado of flying art supplies, I realized that there might have been more than one reason why no one has attempted something like we are here, before now.”

Xerxes was the one to blink in surprise as he was forcefully interrupted. “I’m absolutely capable of taking care of a class of children on my own. Even if some of them have magic, and deplorable manners. And just because I set a punishment Lord Slytherin doesn’t agree with is no reason to undermine my authority, or doubt my competence!”

For a moment Xerxes wondered where this outburst had come from, but then the realisation hit almost as a shock. Mrs. Moors was only still carrying a wand because she had managed to get enough OWLs, and barely at that. She had been good in everything theoretical, but lacked in performance with magic in general. She had Outstanding marks in History, Astronomy, and Muggle Studies, but only barely passing grades for Potions, Runes, and Arithmancy. She had failed in all classes where performance with a wand to a certain degree was needed for a passing grade. Her NEWTs were even less impressive. She had managed only three: one for History of Magic,
one for Astronomy, and the last for Muggle Studies. As far as Xerxes' research into her qualifications had turned up, she could only perform charms and jinxes taught to first- and second-years at Hogwarts. For all intents and purposes, she was almost a Squib, and probably was treated as such by most people.

“No worries, Mrs. Moors. No one doubts your competence. But you can’t be everywhere in a room of small children. So I wanted to propose that there always be two adults in class with the children. Helping where it’s needed, and making sure that magic can’t get that out of hand so easily. I want to get your input to this idea. But that’s not the main point of this meeting with Lord Slytherin.” Xerxes had kept his tone polite, careful not to let his realisation of her position show in any way. Dorcas always had resented the occasions where someone had treated her with pity for her lack of magic. Mrs. Moors relaxed slightly.

“As a parent – or as good as – to Marcus, Lord Slytherin is interested in knowing if this was the first violent reaction of the boy’s magic. You, as his primary teacher, are the best person to ask for such information.” After Marvolo had cooled down a bit in that meeting after the incident, he had indeed shown concern that this could be a regular occurrence.

In that moment there was a knock at the door and after Xerxes’ call to enter, Marvolo walked in, exhibiting all the grace of the predator. One of the usual ways the other was prone to mask his slight discomfort at entering a totally alien situation. Xerxes had to work hard to mask his smirk, and judging by the narrowing of his friend’s eyes, he hadn’t been all that successful. “Marvolo, come in take a seat, and a cup of tea, before we begin.”

A few pleasantries were exchanged, and an overly sweet tea was prepared, before Xerxes started to lead into the discussion by removing any temptation even to come near doubting Mrs. Moors' expertise. “I’ve already informed Mrs. Moors that I plan to double up the adults per classroom to reduce the risk of accidents and increase the personal attention each child can get, making it easier to help them develop their strengths and improve their weaknesses.”

Xerxes noted with relief that Marvolo was nodding. “If you make it mixed teams, one person at ease with performing magic, and one either incapable of using it, or rarely relying on it, you would make sure the children learn from the beginning the diversity of our world, providing positive role models.” This suggestion was delivered with a calm tone in between sips of tea. “I think the person with more experience in teaching should be in charge, and the other more of an assistant.” All three of them were aware that this qualification – of being a trained teacher – almost always applied to the Squibs Xerxes had hired. Very few witches and wizards with other avenues open to them went to Muggle University to get teaching degrees.

Mrs. Moors nodded, visibly appeased by the way both Xerxes and Marvolo had spoken so far. “It certainly would make dealing with discord, and difficult children easier. If there are enough funds to make that possible, you won’t hear me complain. And I’m sure the others will agree.”

“I’m currently more interested in getting insight into Marcus’ behaviour in class. I have mostly spent time with him when he was the focus of attention, not really competing with anyone.” Marvolo switched the topic, turning his full attention to the teacher. Xerxes watched in interest. It was always nice to see how others dealt with the intensity Marvolo was once again able to display, now that he had his good looks and sanity back.

“Was that the first time his magic reacted so forcefully to his frustration? Or has it happened before?”

Mrs. Moor slowly shook her head. “That was the first time I’ve witnessed something like this from him. Until I saw that only Marcus’ drawing had been left undamaged, I wasn’t even sure he had
been the one causing it. It could have been the girl reacting defensively to the situation. Marcus was grabbing for the pencil in her hand.” She took a sip from her tea, clearly contemplating the matter. “I haven’t seen much magic in my classroom so far. Most of the time there is no need for the children to defend themselves or others, nor is there much anger.”

“So no positive displays either? Levitating something? Floating down from the swing?” Mrs. Moors simply shook her head, again not interrupting Marvolo. “I’m not sure what would be considered normal for a child his age. I haven’t been around many small children so far. Nor would I consider myself a typical case.” Marvolo turned to look at Xerxes. “Do you have information on what he did to catch the notice of the Obliviator Squad?”

Xerxes shrugged. “I can look it up. But I think it’ll match with most of the others from less-than-ideal living conditions. Something spectacular to defend themselves from harm, either by other children, or a supposed caretaker. If Obliviators are called, it’s mostly something that can’t be explained away or just be ignored. So, likely inflating someone, or pushing them away.” Xerxes got a feeling what Marvolo was getting at. But arranging for therapy for Marcus would have to wait for later. “I’ll have a look after we’re finished here.”

“I wanted to offer to donate art supplies to the school,” Marvolo said, snatching up a few of the sugar-coated cookies. “I was a little puzzled as to why there was only one pencil of that particular green in the whole classroom.”

Mrs. Moors sighed. “I’m not sure why or how it happens, but more stuff gets lost or turns up broken than I would consider normal for a school. The children are very careful with the supplies, never damaging anything on purpose. But despite that, after a day or two, pencils start to turn up in odd places, broken, in need of sharpening constantly… Now that I think about it, that is more than odd.”

Xerxes frowned. He had assumed that the constant need to order more supplies – paper, erasers, ink, pencils, and other stationary like that – was normal, attributing the high demand to the number of children learning and the fact that they were children in the first place.

An amused chuckle from Marvolo brought both Xerxes and Mrs. Moors up short. With a pointed, questioning look, Xerxes prompted his friend to speak up and explain his sudden mirth.

“Hogwarts has a poltergeist, as the only place in Britain as far as I know, because there are so many adolescent witches and wizards living there the bigger part of the year.” Dread started to form in Xerxes’ stomach. “Maybe these are the early signs of a poltergeist forming here because of all the children spending so much time here. It could be that the ambient magic in the massive wards we placed here is contributing to that.” A slightly evil grin was aimed at Xerxes. “I think we have found another possible reason for why an elementary school for magical children wasn’t established sooner.”

Closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose, Xerxes quietly despaired. How could he handle a ghost as disruptive as Peeves had always been?

He would need to consult with the Deputy Headmistress, or maybe Severus Snape. As two who had taught at the school longer than Xerxes had gone to school there, they should have some insight.

Opening his eyes again, Xerxes gave the still-amused-looking Marvolo the evil eye. “I want your help in tracking down any and all literature that might help us determine if this scenario you’re painting is an actual possibility.”
“I’m happy to offer my assistance! I don’t think it’s all that often that one can investigate the causes for the manifestation of a poltergeist.” Marvolo sounded eager and Xerxes nodded in acceptance. What else should he do? One thing was clear he wouldn’t be bored anytime soon.

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Tuesday, 23rd of January 1996

They had send out invitations to participate in their experiment with the morning mail. Students at several tables had received the letters written by Sonja – she also had had a heavy hand in the wording – asking them to help test a batch of potion to see if it was able to correctly gauge the closeness of the relation they had to others invited as well.

They had to stick to those either above the age of seventeen, or who they could get permission for participation from the parents for. They also had invited a few adults. All in all, they had managed to get quite a few positive answers through the charmed parchments.

“I still feel it was a juvenile way to ask for an answer. Boxes to tick at the end of the invitation. There are much more dignified ways to go about something like this,” Severus groused once again, while carefully measuring out doses of the *collecting-solution* into ivory goblets.

“Shush, darling.” Sonja said from where she was preparing several shallow bowls of quartz with the *testing-compound*. “I know it goes against your sense of professionalism and decorum, but I remind you that we both agreed it was the best way to get answers swiftly. Sometimes it’s expedient to let go of proper ways for the sake of efficiency.”

Severus sighed, because they had agreed that they needed to test this first attempt at a two-part procedure for this on a greater scale soon, and that it wasn’t possible to go the long and arduous way of acquiring willing test subjects.

“I know, love. But I’m still sure we could have found someone else to take Black’s place in this test.” And how it had irked Severus that the insufferable, immature Lord Black had agreed to participate.

Sonja threw him a teasing look over her shoulder. She really knew him well. “We did invite Mrs. Tonks, and she said no. So be happy that Lord Black agreed, because otherwise we wouldn’t have had a relationship of second cousins for our series.”

They had invited people with known family connections to see if they could prove that connection, or closeness, with their potion. They already had tested themselves, establishing that they had eliminated the explosive quality of all their previous one-potion attempts.

Dinner had been over for a while, and just before they had finished the setup there was a knock at the door.

Sonja opened it to let in the Weasley twins. Unusual calm, the two stepped in and walked over to one of the tables at a gesture from Severus, but he guessed the eager glint in their eyes, the way they were eyeing the bowl and goblets on their table, indicated that they wanted to be a part of this very much, and therefore would do what they could to prevent failure.
Severus had sent a letter to Arthur Weasley, asking for permission to get Ronald and Ginevra Weasley to take part in the trial as well – it would have been good to see if the reaction to identical twins was different or equal to that between normal siblings of the same family – but had been denied.

One after the other, the others came in. Black and Mr. Slytherin walked in talking animatedly about some woman who someone named Sam had found on some island or other. Draco came in, followed by a few more Slytherins, like the Carrow twins, the Greengrass sisters, and a pair of distant cousins who both were in their seventh year. Miss Granger came in – looking flustered – closely followed by Lord Slytherin and Xerxes Lestrange.

Hopefully this selection of individuals would help them gauge the effectiveness of their current formula.

When all were settled at their tables with the partner Sonja and Severus had assigned Severus walked to the front of the classroom they were using, his robes billowing around him.

“First, thank you all for your agreement to help us with the development of a potion to ascertain familial closeness that doesn’t violate the treaty with the goblins. Let me explain the procedure.”

Severus took a few steps, which brought him behind the setup prepared on his own desk. “Each of you will first need to swirl the potion from the goblet in their mouth until the sand in this glass,” He indicated a rather large sand glass – calling it an hourglass would be inaccurate as it only ran a few minutes – standing before him, “before spitting it out again into the very same goblet. After that we,” here he waved his hand between his wife and himself, “will walk between the rows, looking at the results of the intermediary step. After that you’ll combine the contents of your goblets with the potion in the bowl and wait for the reaction to settle down. Please be prepared to report on any experiences during this, and what the last things consumed by you were. Including potions you might have taken today.”

A few questions followed to clarify matters before the testing commenced. Severus took note of quite a few pulled faces. He hadn’t expected anything else, as the taste really left something to be desired and having to keep the potion in your mouth, moving it around, for a few minutes didn’t make the experience any more pleasant.

Sandgrains silently fell from the top of the glass to the bottom, measuring the time, while Severus felt anticipation rise. Sonja and he had speculated that the colour of the potion, as well as the cloudiness, would be the deciding factor to determine family connections. Their own had been rather muddy in appearance and had had the unappealing colour of decomposing flesh. He was eager to see how the reaction was going to be for the pair of twins they had here today.

Relieved mutterings filled the room as the time was up and the undignified process of spitting the potion back into the goblets was undertaken. If it hadn’t been disrespectful, Severus would have snorted at seeing the Dark Lord spitting something into a goblet. This certainly wasn’t something one got to see often.

Sonja and he started to walk the rows, taking notes, and asking a few questions here and there, and as he was accustomed to doing, Severus listened in on the conversations that seemed to be the most interesting. This habit of living as a spy probably never would vanish again. Turning his attention to the conversation between Lord Lestrange and his heiress, Severus wrote down the observation of yet another unchanged-looking collecting-solution.

“I’m just a little irked over Ron’s reaction. I simply don’t understand why he’s been so infuriating since we’ve been back to school.” The girl explained in a hushed voice.
“His reaction to what?” Lord Lestrange asked just as quietly. Severus moved on to the next goblet. No obvious changes.

“That I wanted to leave a little earlier than Harry because I had a letter to send to Victor. I’ve been in correspondence with him since he was here during the tournament. Ron suddenly got that sour look on his face. And he’s always hovering as if he wants to say something, but can’t find the words, or something!” Severus was amazed as always at how unaware teenagers could be. Even Miss Granger, usually so observant, obviously couldn’t tell that the Weasley brat had a crush on her.

Deciding that it wasn’t his job to help her with her fledgling love life, Severus left her to the capable hands of her great uncle, walking over to where Draco was talking to his mother’s cousin. They seemed civil enough. No reason for Severus to remind his student that he should be respectful. Doing so would have been infuriating. Maybe he would have managed to get a nice insult in. For a moment Severus allowed himself to indulge in that fantasy, before noting that these two potions hadn’t changed their appearance either, and moving on.

It always had been fun insulting the only Black Gryffindor in memory. But as Sonja had asked him again when she had brought up the possibility to include him in the invitations, did he really want to risk being the one holding onto a grudge longer than Black, leaving himself open to being called immature?

Sonja and Severus walked back to the front so they had a better perspective to watch the second phase.

“Try to pour at the same pace so the three components mix evenly. Call for help should there be a violent reaction, and step back if you’re in doubt,” Sonja instructed while Severus got his wand out. He saw the Dark Lord raise a brow in silent surprise, feeling a light touch on his shields passing through the image of the boy standing next to the Dark Lord tinted with not-quite-there worry. Severus send back a piece, an image, of his memory of brewing an earlier batch. That version had foamed and managed to cover the table they had been working on under a bright blue coat of bubbles in under a minutes time. It shouldn’t really be that dangerous.

A bit of tension left the Dark Lord’s shoulders, and he picked up his ivory goblet to start combining the three parts.

There weren’t any violent reactions, and even the Weasley horrors managed to behave themselves. Much to the surprise of them all the potion turned colourless and transparent for the two sets of twins. The others took on different hues of green, or blue – in some cases Severus wasn’t really sure – and different intensities of milkiness.

Sonja asked everyone to answer a few questions, while Severus transferred the results into transparent phials, labelling each one with the two people who had contributed, before casting strong preservation charms on them. Judging by the level of milkiness compared between the siblings and the one from the Dark Lord and his heir, the less cloudiness the closer the connection. The same seemed true for the intensity of colour. The less intense the more closely they were related. It seemed as if there were two or more measures for closeness. They would have to make many more tests if they were to have any hope of getting a somewhat useful scale to measure the connection between two individuals.

But they seemed to be heading the right way. Sharing a triumphant smile, Sonja and Severus cleaned up after everyone had left, looking forward to a nice evening together.
Standing at the front of the room on his small raised dais, Marvolo waited for his followers to arrive. He had a traitor to get rid of and had decided – after asking Malcolm if the man had been healed enough – that today was the day.

The Carrows and Malcolm were already here, preparing for what was to come this evening.

Marvolo himself didn’t feel the anticipation he remembered from the first time the traitor had been among his brethren being punished. If he was honest with himself, his enjoyment of torturing had dimmed considerably over the months since he had regained a body. His theory was that it had something to do with his absorbed horcruxes, and the emotions he had regained as well.

In the end it wasn’t that big of a problem. If he had retained his love for torture, he would have had a problem over time, he was almost certain. It was harder to keep up the mask of young, friendly wizard and Lord if there was a secret to keep as big as regularly torturing people.

One after the other the Death Eaters arrived. Overall they had been slow to respond, but that was only to be expected in the middle of the night. Most of them probably had been asleep.

Severus was one of the last to arrive, giving off waves of unhappiness, something decidedly unusual for the spy. Severus was able to keep his composure under almost all circumstances.

At least that was the impression Marvolo always had had, and his visit to the man’s mind after Marvolo’s resurrection only had strengthened that impression.

Only under the most dire circumstances did Severus show feelings he didn’t want to show. And during a meeting surrounded by Death Eaters, the young man never had shown anything resembling the mood he was projecting now.

Dark eyes met red ones over the expanse of the room. Marvolo let his spy and Potions Master know of his need to be aware of why the man was so… well, grumpy. What he got back was a deep embarrassment and the mental image of Severus’ wife.

For a moment Marvolo was thrown for a loop. He hadn’t even considered that his followers might be doing something else beside sleeping at this time of night.

Best pretend he had never asked or got an answer. Some things he really didn’t need to know about the daily life of his followers. And he was sure Severus would do his best to make sure this particular topic wouldn’t come up between them again.

“Welcome,” Marvolo greeted the gathered Death Eaters who fell silent immediately, turning their full attention to him. “Today you’ll see what awaits those who go against us, who once agreed to be part of this group.” He had prepared a small speech to make sure all of them understood that while he wasn’t torturing them for insignificant infractions, or condoning useless violence, he also wasn’t going to let something as big as Karkaroff’s treachery slide. The man simply had given too many names away to be spared. Marvolo had a duty to protect – or avenge – his people.

“He gave away the names of those he should have protected. He brought pain upon his comrades and their families. He has paid for his crime ever since the night we gathered here back in July, and today you’ll get to see how I’ll make sure his death won’t be traced back to any of us.”

He gave the prearranged signal to Barty, who was standing by the door leading into the back rooms
and the entrance to the cellar and went to inform the Carrows.

Only half a minute later, an almost healthy-looking Igor Karkaroff was brought in. His clothes had been changed to something closely resembling what he had worn when he had been captured – his own clothes had been reduced to rags since then – and his hair had been cut and his beard trimmed. The siblings were handling the man without any care, probably leaving bruises on his arms.

It had taken some time, but Marvolo had found the spells he needed to achieve the effect he wanted. It should look like Karkaroff had died in that storm he had been warned about, getting what was coming to him because he had ignored the warnings of the locals.

A small wave was enough for Amycus and Alecto to push the traitor to the ground, stepping back so they wouldn’t be in their Lord's way. Once Karkaroff had managed to get to his knees – not daring to look up – Marvolo informed the man of his fate. “You’ll die tonight. Any last words?”

Karkaroff didn’t look as if he would be able to formulate anything even resembling a sentence, so Marvolo didn’t wait any longer.

Feeling the eyes of all gathered here on him, Marvolo raised his hand, pale wand firmly grasped, and started the series of curses he had so carefully planned, and had then practiced, to give the impression that this was an easy task for him.

It wasn’t.

But appearance was important. Even now.

The first spell would make sure that Karkaroff wouldn’t die until the very end. Then Marvolo started to reduce the body of the traitor into a state that would be expected to be found when a human body had lain about in the wild for several months.

The sharp sound of a neck breaking would imitate the cause of death Marvolo wanted the Muggles to assume. After that, Karkaroff didn’t stop screaming while his body started to decompose, developing the traces of animals, insects, and other things eating at him. Effects of the weather were imitated next. Heat, cold, wind, and rain.

When he was finished, there only was a husk left of the man.

Tired, Marvolo let his arm sink to his side. There was still work left to do before he could send the Carrows on their way to place the body of Igor Karkaroff at the foot of a cliff near where they had captured him, to be found soon.

The pause he allowed himself before he started to clear away all traces of the spells he had cast hopefully would be interpreted as his admiring his work.

Finally he waved at the twins. “Take him to where you found him. Make sure the place you leave the body in is one that hasn’t been visited since the summer. Best would be to bury him under a landslide. And make sure to not leave any trace of your presence! Dismissed.”

The Carrows vanished first. And all the others still stood at attention, waiting for him to dismiss them as well.

“Remember, as long as you follow my orders and keep our secrets, I’ll protect and support you. But defy me and you’ll bear the consequences.” A few certainly remembered Corban Yaxley and the man’s death by his own hand, unsure if the man had killed himself before the Dark Lord could get a hand on him, or if the poison had been forced on him.
Marvolo wasn’t about to sate their curiosity. “Get back home. I’ll see most of you soon.” But for now he would go home, take a long hot shower, maybe get a mug of hot chocolate with the little marshmallow pieces Flimm had started to add, and then check if Henry might be awake.

He felt the need to talk to his son, hear something about his dull day, maybe how far he had come in the transfiguration essay he had wanted to work on after the potions test, something normal. Somehow that sounded like the exact thing he could use right now.

It was odd, but Marvolo didn’t feel like investigating this need right now. Unbidden, the advice Mrs. Goyle had given him came to mind. It wasn’t necessary to confront his thoughts and feelings every time he felt something unsettling or new. But he couldn’t run away forever. At the moment he was too tired to do anything about it. So he left the room after the last Death Eater was gone and apparated over to Griffin House.

Flimm was already waiting, taking the robes Marvolo had worn, and picking up the clothes the tired wizard let just let fall to the floor on his way to the warm shower he was focused on.

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Wednesday, 24th of January 1996

As so often, Harry and his mixed group of friends were gathered at the Ravenclaw table for lunch. Harry had a letter from Marvolo in his pocket, still a little puzzled about what he should make of it. The letter spoke of work until late in the night, which Harry had translated into a careful description of a Death Eater meeting taking place, and a wish to speak with Harry – Marvolo had written Henry, and Harry was getting a little irritated by that, even knowing that he would need to allow Marvolo to call him Harry – that he had dismissed in favour of writing a letter, because Harry could use every hour of sleep in his OWL year. It was puzzling, and Harry planned to call Marvolo on the mirror as soon as he found a moment of peace.

It so wasn’t going to be now.

“It’s so hard to decide what to do after school!” Hermione exclaimed, spreading out a lot of brightly coloured pamphlets on the table between the plates, ignoring her food. “I did a little research at the end of second year. I needed something to base my selection of classes on.” Her tone was a little dismissive, as if it was a natural thing to do, and not something unusual. Harry briefly wondered how many thirteen-year-old students would even bother if not pushed by their parents. “But now I’m unsure what I can combine with the duties of a Lady. You know?” Hermione asked of them all, clearly wanting... no, more like expecting, an answer.

Neville was the first to speak up. “I think I want to work for a Herbology Mastery. It fits well with the businesses of my family. And I’m good at it. Gran can manage the seat a little longer, and working on research and such once I’m finished should work well together with being Lord Longbottom.” He heaved a mighty sigh. “Not sure if Gran will support my wish, though. She always harps on and on about me following in my father’s footsteps. Which would mean to go into Auror training.”

“Don’t look so morose!” Ron chimed in, clapping the other Gryffindor on the back, “Being an
Auror is great! I want to go be an Auror after school. I think it’ll be awesome if you and Harry are there too!” Here Ron turned to include Harry, clearly wanting him to agree, but Harry wasn’t so sure. Being together with Ron and Neville certainly wouldn’t be bad. But if it would be enough to make him enjoy being an Auror was more than up in the air.

“Training with you would be fun,” Harry finally agreed, but before Ron could ramble on, he continued speaking. “But that would involve a lot of fighting. I don’t think I want to spent the rest of my life fighting. Not sure what else to do, though.” As there wasn’t all that much time left before lunch would be finished, Harry returned to eating what he had put on his plate, still paying attention to his friends because they now started to make suggestions about what he could do for a living after they all had finished school.

“Why don’t you become a teacher, Harry?” Daphne wanted to know, waving her fork around over her plate. “I think you would be a great teacher.”

“If you aim for a Mastery in Defence you could teach it like you do at the club, or maybe go into research.” Theo chimed in from where he sat between Draco and Daphne.

“You could also go into art.” Luna said with quiet conviction, smiling over to him while idly stirring her soup.

“I think I understand why you don’t want to fight. But as the youngest seeker in hundreds of years, professional Quidditch should work out almost as well as Auror! I’m sure the teams would do almost anything to get you onto their team!” Ron brought the conversation back to himself, clearly happy with his clever suggestion.

That it was only another, more regulated form of fighting, probably didn’t even occur to him.

“If you’re interested in going into professional Quidditch, I’m sure I can get you into contact with Victor. He can give you sound advice as a professional player himself. What to look out for in a contract, how to manage the fame, and all that. Shall I write him?” Hermione picked that idea up. It was quite the turnaround from her earlier years. Twelve-year-old Hermione probably would have tried to persuade him to take up a more academically inclined career path. It was nice to see that she, too, was growing up and out of her childish tendencies.

“Why are you still writing to that stupid guy?” Ron suddenly demanded of Hermione, his ears taking on a shade of red not working well with his hair.

“Because I want to! And what does it concern you, anyway? I don’t have to defend my choice in friends to you, Ronald Weasley!” Hermione – rightfully, in Harry’s opinion – objected vehemently against Ron’s protest. They quickly descended into what would have been a shouting match if Hermione hadn’t kept her voice down. And they drew a lot of attention anyway.

Harry noticed with amusement that all of the others sitting around the arguing Gryffindors were rolling their eyes. Maybe it was the constant exposure to Slytherin politics and observations, but Harry was pretty sure that Ron had a crush on their studious friend, and that Hermione hadn’t really noticed yet. She was pretty perceptive, but when someone was the one affected, it was a little different than looking on from the outside.

Hermione stormed off when Ron didn’t shut up, and when the rest of them left the Great Hall, Ron had fallen into a broody silence. That was going to get even more awkward before it – if ever – it got better, Harry would almost bet on that.
It certainly was better to reside in the guest bedroom in his brother’s home than being stuck in a closed ward at the hospital. But it still wasn’t what Albus really wanted.

Of course he now realised that the danger he had been in had been very real. The exposure to that curse had clouded his mind to the point that he had been a real danger to himself. He might have reacted violently to a shadow, making sending Aurors after him necessary. And if that really had happened, he certainly would have lost all chance to get back into his rightful position of Headmaster, and of every hope of one day regaining the position of Chief Warlock.

But still, he was better now, the ritual had removed the damaging influence, and the potions he was taking as directed were helping him restore his concentration and health. So why was he still restricted from using magic, reduced to reading and to correspondence? There certainly was a lot of work waiting for him on the Headmaster’s desk at Hogwarts. Minerva was a good deputy, but while still teaching and with her duties as Head of House, she had no way to keep ahead of the work.

Setting down the book he had now read a third time, Albus got up from his chair to pace the length of the room a few times. He could use the exercise to build his stamina back up.

Elphias had informed him of the trouble that had come about down at the Ministry regarding the adoption laws. Of course Albus had thought about ways to change them, to prevent the most dark families from stealing children from muggle backgrounds from their families. But in the end the vague nature of the old laws, and the possibility of placing a child with a family, if needed, without much interference from the Ministry had trumped any other concerns. And to only spoil Tom’s plan to buy the loyalty of his Death Eaters by funnelling children into their stagnant families the effort had been too big.

Elphias had been stumped by who might have been behind that tangling of procedure and competence, but had commented on the apparent ease with which Tom had managed to unite a large number of votes from all the usual voting blocs.

That had been truly troubling news.

Before he could follow that line of thought further, the door opened to admit an irritated Aberforth. “You have a guest!” said Albus’ brother in his gruffest voice, before turning on his heel and marching off right past that guest and down the stairs.

Albus stared after his brother, a little bit flummoxed, before turning to see who was visiting him here in his exile. He just barely managed to contain any outward reaction when the trademark blond hair gave away the identity of his guest. “Mr. Malfoy! What a surprise. Please do come in, sit down. I would offer you something to drink, but I fear that isn’t possible at this moment.” It took them some time, but after a few silent moments, they both were sitting down, facing each other, and Albus waited for an explanation of why Lucius was here.

“Mr. Dumbledore, I’m here as a representative of the Board of the Hogwarts Governors,” Lucius Malfoy started to explain the reason for his visit. “It was decided that in light of recent events, and current public opinion, the Board cannot support your return to the post of Headmaster. We all feel you should have the opportunity to resign on your own. You have until the end of January to do so, before the Board will take it upon itself to announce the change.” For a moment Albus was searching for a way to react to this. Was his reputation really that tarnished in the eye of the public?
That simply wasn’t possible, he had always worked for the best of the whole population. Who had managed to make them all forget what good he had done?

“Did Tom, Lord Slytherin, have his hand in that?” It wouldn’t be the first time that Lucius had used pressure and bribes to evict him from his position at the school. It was only logical to assume that Tom might have ordered Lucius to do so again.

His hands folded around his gloves, placed on his knees, Lucius shook his head. “No, he did not. I wasn’t involved, either, until the vote was called at the last meeting. It was a surprise. You can’t pin that on us this time, old man. The tides have certainly turned. Consider the offer to resign before we throw you out of office because you pose a threat to the students.” Lucius stood, gave a shallow bow from his neck, and prepared to leave. “I wouldn’t try to regain the goodwill of the public. Retire gracefully. That’s the best you can hope for at this point.”

Long after Lucius Malfoy had left, Albus sat there deep in thought. How had everything gone so out of control? Where had he miscalculated? Why was one error in judgement over a cursed ring enough to diminish his defeat of a Dark Lord, and his constant work to counter the Dark? It was a complicated puzzle.

Walking from his room after a long talk with Marvolo on the Mirror, Harry tried not to let himself be frustrated over his own lack of courage. Neither he nor Marvolo had spoken about the stuff that had started to keep his mind busy more and more.

How he should keep Marvolo and Voldemort and their actions separated in his mind, when the Death Eaters still existed and acted. How it could be that he had come to see that there might be an actual need to put pressure on people, exchange favours, keep blackmail material at hand, if one wanted to accomplish anything good in politics. How he wanted Marvolo to call him Harry, despite knowing all he knew about the wizard’s continued use of the Dark Arts – part of that certainly being his research in how to remove a piece of soul from Harry without killing him – and the people who had died, in the distant and not-so-distant past.

It was a terrible mess, and nothing of this had been talked about just now.

Mrs. Goyle had shown Harry art as a way to express what he couldn’t talk about. Maybe writing a letter, just as Marvolo had done would give him the time to weigh his words carefully, make sure that what he wanted to say was clear to understand.

It was a sound plan, but would have to wait until Harry had finished the homework for Potions that was due tomorrow. With tutoring and lots of dedication, Harry had managed to get a grudging acceptance from Snape – Harry wasn’t really sure where they stood now – and he wasn’t about to lose that by handing in an essay riddled with blotches and spelling errors.

Harry settled down in their usual spot near the main fireplace, the place of honour for the most important students of the House, where the others were already waiting for him, getting out a new sheet of parchment to make a clean version of his homework.

Over time the younger kids started to leave for bed, the older students getting more relaxed, someone even getting out some spirits, passing the small bottle round among their group. And
Harry drifted over to help both Vincent and Gregory with the theory of some of the spells used to defend against dangerous magical creatures such as lethifolds, boggarts, and others that could be deadly if encountered unprepared.

He was explaining the theory behind the Patronus Charm again, when a girl sitting somewhere a little away started to speak. “No, can’t see what’s the fuss all about. Just a scrawny fifth-year. Not all that good marks, not even handsome. And I’m sure he’s only bark. No bite to that one.” If Harry wasn’t mistaken, the one speaking was the seventh-year, Joane Pyrites, daughter to one of the lesser Death Eaters. Last year she had belonged to those sitting next to the fire.

That probably was enough of a reason for her to feel resentful against Harry. And he was pretty sure she was speaking about him.

The room fell silent, and it was clear that there was no way he could evade a confrontation any longer. He sighed, and checking that his wand was where it should be, stood. He turned while checking where everyone was sitting. Possible allies, neutral or undecided students, and those daring enough to disregard the rumours that there was a bad and short future waiting for all those who would do Harry harm.

“Oh, look, the kitten is showing its claws.” Pyrites and her friends laughed, obviously not unaffected by the alcohol they had been drinking.

Harry mockingly raised an eyebrow, carefully taking a few steps into a more open section of the common room so he would have room to move. “You’re confident, aren’t you?” He asked, taking his wand out of its sheath, idly running his hand down the length of the carved wood. “It’s easy being confident here. But that confidence makes you stupid. You shouldn’t drink quite that much. Hasn’t your father one of those nifty tattoos?” Harry tossed out there, seeing her pale a little, and how the others flinched. It seemed they hadn’t expected him to know who they were or that they had family members in the Dark Lord’s ranks. Marvolo had made sure that Harry was aware of the orders he had given out to all his followers – bound to him by a version of a fealty oath – and their children at Hogwarts. And to make sure Harry would be able to seek their help and protection if he ever should need it, Harry had been informed of all their names, Houses, and the year they were in.

Until now Harry hadn’t used that information, he still really wished to be just himself and treated for who he was as a person rather than who he was in society, but he was willing to do so now. He might even be able to prevent greater harm if he did this now, with enough force to make his point.

Settling his feet in a good position, already thinking over what he might need to cast to make her back off that wouldn’t break any rules of the school, or at least would make sure the prefects didn’t feel they would need to report him, Harry focused most of his attention on Pyrites, where she tried to get out from among her friends.

She clearly had thought he would back up without a fight, avoiding a confrontation. She clearly had forgotten that he had been sorted into Gryffindor as well.

“But I don’t need to run for help to protect myself. So you were saying?” He tilted his head to the side, projecting much more calm than he was really feeling. This could go so wrong so quickly.

He felt more than he saw his friends moving into positions around him, getting into place to guard his back.

But his attention was on Pyrites and the other seventh years standing – or better sitting – at her side, some clearly no threat because they were too sloshed to aim a wand straight. Or even sit straight.
“Really? You thought speaking ill of me would be enough to make me run? You weren’t paying attention last year, were you?” Harry quickly brought up a Protego to block a spell shooting at him from behind Pyrites.

In a split-second decision, Harry shot a quick series of body binds at Pyrites and the people sitting around her. They all dropped, too slow to react, and came to rest against each other and the love seats at odd angles, because it was too crowded for them to fall properly to the floor.

Keeping his wand trained on Pyrites, Harry walked over to where she was staring at him in horror. “You think me weak, because I don’t use my status to put others down, make you grovel? Or because my mother had parents unable to wield magic?” He asked in a deadly calm voice, making sure it carried into the last corners of the room. “I understand your confusion. But take a piece of advice. If I were anyone else, I might feel the need to make you fear me right now by, say… casting something painful at you. Right here where everyone can see.” He waved his wand around at all the people watching, not one of them raising their wand to protect those that had been standing with Pyrites. “We all know it has worked in the past. Pretty well even, by what I saw last summer.” Harry heard a few gasps, but still focused on the terrified eyes of Pyrites. “But I’m me. So I’ll say this. I don’t demand you like me, but I expect you to be civil. Do we understand each other?”

Of course she had no way to confirm or deny his demand, still frozen in a body bind, helpless. But Harry nodded anyway. “You might want to warn your family. Because I have a feeling that this will not go unnoticed, even if I don’t speak about it.” And Harry didn’t plan to speak to Marvolo about what had happened. But there was a darker shadow in that corner near the passage that connected the common room with the quarters of their Head of House, the resident Potions Master and spy. The man would probably report what he had seen here, regardless of Harry’s wishes.

Turning to see Septimus Yaxley standing with the fifth-years at his back, Harry casually placed his wand back in his sleeve. “It’s getting late. Let’s go to bed, no use to study any more tonight, anyway.”

It had felt natural to decide this for them all, but a part of Harry was still surprised that they all actually did what he had said – or more accurately – ordered them to do.

Once they all had made it to Harry’s room, following him in unspoken agreement, and the door had closed behind them, Harry let his bag fall to the floor, the sound of its landing muffled by the nice carpet, and sank down, shaking, himself.

Theo was there only a blink of an eye later, holding a glass of water in his hand, steadying Harry so he could take a few sips. It took a moment for Harry to realise it, but then he heard Theo murmuring soothing words promising that he was safe, that everything had gone well, that he could relax now.

Once Harry felt the small panic attack had passed, he sat back, giving Theo a weak smile, and looking around the room. The others had settled down onto his chair, the loveseat, the bed, and the carpet. There was a decidedly awkward air surrounding them all, and Harry wished the others had gone before he had recovered.

“Thanks for your support.” He rubbed his neck with one hand that was still shaking slightly. “I hope they’ll reconsider their actions before they do something like that again.”

“They won’t dare,” Yaxley said with conviction. “The wordless spells at so rapid a pace... I’ll wager not one of them is able to do that. They won’t bother you again, Heir Slytherin.”
“It really is late. And I guess we don’t want to invoke Snape's ire. I’ll make sure Harry’s alright, the rest of you go to bed. We’ll see each other at breakfast.” Theo kept his tone friendly, but left no room for doubt that the others should leave now.

Theo’s help was minimal, getting out Harry’s pyjamas for instance, but Harry was happy that he was there.

Once he was under the covers, sitting in his bed, Harry voiced the question that was burning on his tongue. “I did those silently?”

Theo nodded. “You did.”

“Well, shit.” He never had even tried to cast something without speaking the incantation. It wasn’t even taught before the student reached sixth year. Deciding that he didn’t have the energy to think about it more right now, Harry moved so he was comfortably settled into his bed, sleep quickly claiming him, while Theo left the room.

oooOOooo

Severus had been informed by the wards on the common room, of a number of spells cast in rapid succession. While he normally would ignore spells aimed at other students low in potential to harm such as those now, the short span of time in which this many Petrificus Totalus had been cast hinted at a group ganging up on an individual, and that wasn’t something he could let slide.

He watched the situation play out and was pretty sure that Mr. Slytherin had spotted him where he was standing in the shadows, his dark robes passably blending in.

Mr. Slytherin was right, Severus would report the incident, and the fact that the boy had handled it well, to the Dark Lord.

Leaving the seventh-years where they were, Severus retreated back to his quarters and returned to his wife. He would write a short note in the morning and send it before breakfast. Now he had other things to do.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it :) Once again a few scenes came out other than I had planned, but I feel they fit well into the story in their current form.

Translations:
Oh, mon Dieu! - Oh my God!
Ainsi donc, le père de mes deux beautés est un sorcier - So the father of the two flowers is a wizard?
Tais-toi, Maman! Laisse le parler - Silence, mother! Let him speak.
Tiens compte que quoi que ce monsieur puisse te proposer. Si c’est un Lord, c’est qu’il
a de l’argent! - Consider whatever he offers. If the mage is a Lord he has money!
Je vais nous chercher quelque chose à boire” - I’ll get us something new to drink.
tante – aunt

Thanks to DiagonAlleyParis for the help with the French translation.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Thursday, 25th of January 1996

The first thing Marvolo saw on the dinner table that evening – beside the delicious smelling stack of waffles waiting for him – were two letters placed near his plate. Normally letters were taken to the study, seeing that Flimm thought these important enough to be placed on top of the evening edition of the newspaper made Marvolo quite curious.

He walked over to his place, sat down and had a look at the letters, while floating tea into his cup with nary a thought. Just seeing his own name on the two envelopes cleared up who had written to him. He would recognise Henry’s improved but still unpractised letters anywhere, and the spiky hand of his Potions Master was so distinctive there wasn’t a shred of doubt of who had send the letter.

Getting out his wand to cast the detection charms that had become second nature quite some time ago by now, Marvolo made sure that no one had tried to tamper with the letters. He had come to rely on Flimm and trust the elf, but it always paid to be overly cautious. He didn’t really like the man, but Mad Eye Moody had a point with his cries of *constant vigilance*.

Taking a sip from his tea – maybe he should add another spoon of sugar – Marvolo contemplated a few scenarios which could result in him receiving a letter from his son and the boy’s Head of House at the same time. It couldn’t be something too serious as Severus wouldn’t have dared delaying to inform him by patronus or equally fast means, and Henry had the mirror to communicate much faster than by owl post.

So maybe something formal, but not urgent?

He decided to read the letter from Severus first, as he was pretty sure that whatever the man had to tell him, he would do in a short and comprehensive manner. Teenagers were prone to rambling and overly emotional displays. At least what he had witnessed in the past and been told since he had adopted his son indicated that was the case.

A quick, weak, slicing charm cast without his wand, broke the seal, and with a practiced flick of his wrist the letter was out and unfolded.

For a moment red eyes moved quickly over the letter the tension slowly seeping out of Marvolo’s shoulders. It was indeed nothing serious. The letter had been sent in the morning, just after breakfast ended and before the start of lessons.

Severus had thought it soon enough to inform Marvolo – Severus had written in his role as Head of
House and was using suitable address and wording – of a small altercation which had taken place the evening before in the Slytherin common room. It seemed that Henry had handled that rather well. Maybe it wouldn’t even be necessary to take action to remind the parents of those careless students what Marvolo was willing to do in defence of his son.

But he could maybe arrange for a social event – dinner would be nice – and let a comment drop regarding this. Bragging about the skills of one’s child was something accepted and even expected in their social circle, after all.

A small smirk danced over Marvolo’s face as he imagined the reactions he would get to see if he did that. Surely they would panic for a moment and try to hide it. It would be delicious. He would have to consult with Barty to find a date for that dinner.

After this short report from Severus – not actually demanding any action on Marvolo’s part – Marvolo expected to find some longer winded recounting of the same event in Henry’s letter.

But the letter had quite a different topic. And was written in the flowing script of the almost slithering lines of Parselscript.

_Dear Marvolo,_

_While we have spoken many times about the things happening in our lives from day to day, we seem to avoid some topics quite successfully._

_I know that this is a rather un-Slytherin way to go about this, but I feel that there isn’t really a good way to express what I feel we need to do while being subtle about it, and making sure that there isn’t any way for my words to be misinterpreted._

_Soon our family will grow to include Marcus, and I feel we need to clear the air between us concerning the past we share, the present and demands and expectations placed on us by others, and the future we wish for._

_Considering some of the topics, and the possibility of tempers flaring, I think it might be good to have Mrs. Goyle on hand as a kind of mediator and translator. She always has helped me understand how I feel, and why that might be the case or what the cause. I hope she’ll be able to do something similar for the both of us._

_It might seem odd that I’m writing a letter for this, but some things have been going around in my head for some time now, and despite the fact we speak each day, I haven’t found the courage to bring them up. Writing everything down has some advantages that speaking face to face lacks._

_Hoping to hear from you soon,_

_Henry_

_PS: please pass on greetings from me to Nagini_
Marvolo slowly put the letter down onto the table. Oddly enough the fact that Henry hadn’t said anything about the confrontation in the common room stuck out the most to Marvolo.

Of course he couldn’t deny that there was a lot Henry and he didn’t talk about. The capture, torture, and subsequent captivity of Karkaroff hadn’t been discussed. Despite the fact that Henry technically had been present as the Carrows had brought him in. And that the man had died just a short time ago hadn’t been mentioned either.

Marvolo hadn’t tried to keep the continued existence of his Death Eaters from Henry, in fact he had accepted a few calls in the middle of Death Eater meetings and was sure Henry had realised what had been happening at the time. But they never actually had talked about that.

Of course Marvolo had made sure Henry knew which families had strong ties to him – implicitly admitting that they had at least one marked Death Eater in their family – so his son would know who was bound to help him if needed.

And Henry had seen more than once how his Death Eaters had greeted him formally when he had called them via their modified mark.

But in the end, these observations Marvolo had allowed Henry to make didn’t really replace actually talking about it, and allowing Henry to ask questions.

Was it wise to allow this talk, that had a big potential to turn into a confrontation, to happen? Marvolo wasn’t so sure. The escape of the Death Eaters from Azkaban could come up. If Henry asked the right questions, the death of Bellatrix – his decision to sacrifice her – might come up. Or that the Lestrange brothers really weren’t dead after all.

On the other hand, he might have to turn the question around.

Would trying to ignore the obvious need Henry had to talk about things be a good idea?

It had been the tactic Dumbledore had employed, which had backfired on him spectacularly. So the answer was a resounding “no”. He couldn’t ignore this polite request for a confrontation.

But before he went back to his study to write a letter back – it seemed appropriate to use the same line of communication – Marvolo would eat his dinner. No reason to let good food go to waste.

While he ate, Marvolo started to compose a letter to Mrs. Goyle to inform her of Henry’s wish to have a session with Marvolo present to talk about topics concerning them both. Maybe he should review the secrecy contract he had made her sign. It was best to make extra sure that nothing incriminating talked about between him and his son could make it to the Auror Department.

It was late into the night when Marvolo finally went to bed, shoving a grumbling Nagini to the end of his bed to make room for himself. Writing such carefully worded letters, and reading legalese were time-consuming activities.

With a sigh, his familiar wrapped around him, Marvolo slipped into a restful sleep, aided by a small dose of a sleeping draught.

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Up in the room they shared with two other girls, Nawel was braiding the hair of her sister Enora with careful motions and patience, just as their gran had taught them. Most of the time the braids held for more than a week, but they redid them frequently anyway.

It was comforting.

Enora was holding the latest letter from their mother in her hands. Silently contemplating the contents. Beside the fire and the click of beads nothing disturbed the quiet of their dorm, as the others hadn’t made it here yet. They probably still were in the big communal bath enjoying the steam bath, or the bubble pool.

“How do you think the meeting will go?” Enora asked out of the blue, still fiddling with the letter, making clear what meeting she was referring to.

“As I don’t truly know anything about that wizard – that isn’t rumour, anyway – I really can’t say,” Nawel answered, giving a shrug with one shoulder even though her sister couldn’t see that she did so. “But I’m sure that maman will ask a lot of questions. And demand answers.” Enora gave a humming sound of agreement as her only answer. They both had been curious who their father was as long as they could remember.

Speculating about him, why their maman hadn’t been able to find him, what he was doing for a living, had been one of their favourite pastimes when they couldn’t quite go to sleep in the evenings. Lying in bed and spinning fantastical stories of their father the superhero, prince or king, wizard, or maybe even spy, just like James Bond, had filled many hours.

Now the letters from their mother had given them facts, but the story still was fantastical. Just as if it had been plucked right out of one of their favourite fairy tales. A young man at odds with his family, wrongly accused of betraying his friends, imprisoned for a long time, managing to escape, found innocent, and then finally searching for his lost daughters. If they wanted, that could be the plot of a tragic play, or a romance novel.

But it was hard to believe that it was actually the truth.

Finishing another braid with a large bead, Nawel tried to formulate what was on her mind. “I remember what those who went to Hogwarts last year told us about the stories told over there. How the Blacks were in league with that Dark Lord. How it just was clear that Sirius Black had to be the same, that it was only natural that he would betray those he called friends…” For a moment she struggled with the words, “I fear that the British might expect us to be what they think a Black witch should be. A family cursed with insanity.”

“Don’t!” Enora demanded. “You know as well as I do, that those stories get bigger each time they are told. And these are stories told here for their shock value, right along with the stories about the tasks. Dragons, Merpeople, Acromantulas. A Sphinx! Don’t borrow trouble. We’ll get to meet him, and then we’ll see.”

“So you want to meet him?” Nawel wasn’t so sure about that. She was curious, there was no doubt about that. But at the same time she feared what she might learn about the man who was her father.

What if he only wanted to use them to have an heir?

She always had wished for a father who wanted to know her, spend time with her. Therefore those stories making him out to be struggling, fighting, keeping away to keep them safe, had always been the ones she preferred over those he was the powerful hero in. Because if he could be there for them, why wasn’t he?
“I want to meet him. Wouldn’t it be terrible to look back, I don’t know, ten years from now, and ask what if? And we still have to make that paternity test. Until now all we have is the word of a wizard we don’t know that there is an ancient tapestry claiming we are the daughters of Lord Sirius Orion Black.” Enora patiently explained, as always, she simply was the more level-headed of the two of them.

Now Nawel made the humming sound of agreement before starting on the next braid. First they would wait for what their mother had to tell them about the man claiming to be their father. Then they would see.

oooOOooo

Friday, 26th of January 1996

“It’s nice of you to visit, Elphias.” Albus greeted his newest guest, doing his best to appear well on the mend, even as walking up from the door to the living room had put a little bit of a strain on his body. He was working on regaining some of his stamina, but it was slow going.

“Why wouldn’t I visit a good friend?” Elphias said in a mock offended tone, playing up the act with a hand placed to his chest, right over his heart. “And I hoped we could talk a bit about the gossip making the rounds at the Ministry.” With a huff Elphias dropped himself to sit in one of the faded armchairs. Albus really couldn’t understand why his brother insisted on keeping the colour scheme of the rooms so dull, using mostly variations on brown. Leather, wood, nothing but browns.

“Rumours?” Albus inquired, trying to not sound too eager. Even with all the time he had spent reading current publications, and the newspaper each day, nothing could replace what people were talking about in hushed voices and behind closed doors.

“Yes. Somehow it seems as if nobody actually was responsible for pushing forward those uncompleted changes to the adoption procedures once Dolores Umbridge had been sentenced to the kiss. Some speculate that a vengeful spirit was left behind, sabotaging everything with the dark energy generated by her need for revenge.”

A vengeful spirit? Albus snorted at that thought. Dementors consumed souls in their entirety, there would have been nothing left of Dolores Umbridge after a kiss. “So all agree that she is the only one responsible? Truly? What an easy out for all who simply went along with the changes without thinking of the consequences.” Of course Albus knew that most who had been needed to create such a mess probably only had gone along with it to gain the favour of a more influential person, or because they had been gullible enough to fall for some scheme. It still was cowardly to hide behind a dead person.

“You know how it is, Albus.” Elphias waved Albus’ concern away. “It’s easy to claim ignorance, or even to maintain ignorance, if you just go along with the madness that is the bureaucracy of the Ministry these days.”

Nodding to this – it was just too true – Albus expertly shifted the topic of their conversation from one to another until he had heard all that interested him. By then they had consumed an entire pot
of tea and a plate of different pastries.

They exchanged pleasantries and then Albus was alone again.

So the initial efforts to change the adoptions had been started by Dolores Umbridge using the naive Miss Summers as a tool. But for all Albus knew about those things, the young muggleborn girl never would have been able to wield the influence necessary to effect all the changes that had occurred.

Elphias had said that by now so much time had passed and everyone had spoken with almost everyone else, airing their different ideas over who had done what for which reasons that it had become impossible to untangle the mess.

Albus wasn’t so sure about that and got out a piece of parchment and his quill to start writing a letter to the Minister. Maybe he would be able to get to the root of this mystery if he went for the one most interested to get to the bottom of it. The fact that the Minister hadn’t known – Albus knew that Cornelius wasn’t good enough of an actor to pretend otherwise – could harm his standing with the other officials in the Ministry, possibly endangering his position.

Hopefully Albus would learn who had meddled there and for what reasons. Whoever it had been could be a threat to his own plans, or an asset, depending on the reasons behind those actions.

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With quick, big steps Sirius hurried through a cold Paris on the way to the place Olivienne had selected for their meeting.

He wasn’t feeling all that well, in fact he was decidedly nervous. For one, he was in a suit, formal muggle clothing never had been something he liked any better than formal wizarding robes. Then there was the fact that he hadn’t been able to get a look at the place they were meeting in, because her decision had come via letter practically at the last possible moment. It had been meant as a gesture of goodwill on his part, but it seemed that she had used his willingness to let her pick a meeting spot as a way to unbalance him.

Way too Slytherin a tactic for his taste.

Anyway, dwelling on what made him feel nervous wouldn’t make those things go away. So best he concentrated on what he hoped to gain from this meeting. Some more knowledge about his daughters and their mother, as well as permission to meet the girls and speak with them.

That Sirius didn’t really know what Olivienne might hope to gain from meeting him was only another point adding to his nervousness.

Maybe he should have accepted Moony’s offer of coming along, after all, having an ally at hand might have been a good way to keep his nervousness down.

Finally Sirius stood in front of a café that matched the address he had been given, and that looked like it was a cozy place. Steeling his nerves, Sirius strode over to the door, opened it, and went in, starting to undo the buttons of his coat. It was a lot warmer in here then outside, where a slow drizzle made the weather rather unfriendly.
A short sweep of the place confirmed Sirius’ first impression. This was a cozy place. And in a corner, overlooking the whole room, sat a woman who matched the description Sam had given him of Olivienne Moreau, stirring some hot beverage in a big cup.

Now the game was on. There never was a second chance at a first impression, and Sirius really wanted to make a good first impression now that the circumstances had changed so drastically. In the end their first meeting had been back then, and the fact that Sirius didn’t remember a thing implied that he probably hadn’t left a good impression at all.

Taking a deep breath, Sirius walked over to where the woman was sitting, a – hopefully – polite smile on his face.

“Olivienne Moreau?” Sirius asked, giving a small half bow in her direction.

“Oui.” was her answer, her dark brown eyes wandering up and down over Sirius’ figure, assessing him and making him want to squirm as if Professor McGonagall was about to start berating him for a prank. “I assume you are Sirius Black?”

Even her voice managed to instil the dread that the formidable Transfiguration Professor always had managed. Not that Sirius ever had let it show.

“I am,” he answered with another short bow. His voice was steady, but he was pretty sure the fact that he had bowed twice by now, betrayed his nerves.

A slim elegant hand waved towards the bench opposite the one she was sitting on, a clear order only underlined by her demanding, “Please be seated.”

Placing his coat over a hook on a wall nearby, Sirius opened his suit jacket, and slid into the bench. Olivienne and he watched each other over the table without words for a moment. She was as striking a figure as Sam had claimed her to be, and she probably would be able to cow any man who dared crossing her. If she had been as commanding when they had met back then in that club... Sirius could clearly see what had attracted his attention that night.

“How was your journey? Did you have a pleasant flight?” She clearly wasn’t driven by the fear of silences that he had so often seen displayed by the witches clamouring for his attention. They never could stand a silence, starting to talk about something if he just stood there watching but not speaking. Now it was he, unable to stand the silence.

“The flight was fine. But the difference in temperature was, as it always is, a shock. Weather in Europe in January is always so unpleasant,” Olivienne answered, and the two of them fell into meaningless talk about the troubles of long-distance travel, the unpleasant weather, and Paris until the waiter had been by to get Sirius’ order and then deliver the hot milk-coffee and the pastry that had been recommended.

“Can you do something to keep eavesdroppers away?” Olivienne asked, vaguely waving her hand through the air, clearly referencing magic.

Sirius nodded. “Of course.” He got his wand out, cast a look around to make sure no one was watching, and then cast a spell that had made the rounds among the students at Hogwarts their seventh year. “Now what we speak of will go unheard by others.” He didn’t even know how to address her! They had children together so given names seemed appropriate, but he didn’t want to appear to assume too much. It was an altogether awkward meeting.

“Since your investigator came to my mother’s house, I have asked different people to tell me what
they know about you and your family,” she began, sending Sirius’ stomach into a plummeting fall. That could have set him up for failure from the start. Because why would a decent person want to meet with an ex-convict – however undeserved – and the son of as dark a family as the Blacks always had been known as? If she approved of such a background, he might not want to make one of the twins his heiress after all.

“The picture they painted was rather… chequered. So I decided it would be best to get your story right from the source.” Once again her eyes travelled over Sirius. “My impression was that of a man trying to live life to its fullest. Now that I know of the war raging in Britain at that time, I believe that I understand why one would adopt such a mindset. But I need to know who you are now. So please, share why you think I should let you be part of my daughter’s life.”

So she was an even better person than he had any right to hope for. Taking a sip from his coffee, Sirius contemplated where to start and what to tell. It was too long a story to include everything. He would need to stick to the highlights.

Trying to keep his composure, Sirius started. “I guess most of what's said about the Blacks isn’t entirely off the mark. All the halfway decent people tended to be thrown out rather quickly in the last decades. One of my cousins was thrown out for falling in love and marrying a muggleborn wizard instead of going along with the marriage arranged for her. They have a lovely daughter, who's working as an Auror.” Sirius stopped himself from telling the story of all those thrown out, but hoped that this one story was enough to show, that aside from the official image, there was more diversity in the family.

“I ran away from all the pressure to comply with the family line, as I was heir, and support the pure-blood ru… propaganda, when I was old enough to truly understand the implications. The fact that neither my mother nor father would have won any parent-of-the-year awards, especially after I had been sorted contrary to family tradition, only contributed to my wish to be elsewhere. Looking back; the only thing I regret about that is that I left my younger brother behind. Judging by all that I learned since I came back, he wasn’t as lost and unredeemable as I had thought at the time.” A short and familiar stab of pain reminded Sirius of his guilt in this. Maybe if he had stayed, Regulus wouldn’t have joined the Death Eaters, later being killed in an attempt to topple Lord Voldemort.

Another sip from the excellent cup of coffee braced him for the next part. “I joined a vigilante group fighting against the terrorist group known as the Death Eaters, because I felt that my position as an Auror would help them, and that the corruption inside the Ministry was already too widespread for the Ministry to be able to do anything about it.” Sirius sighed. “Many of my closest school friends joined as well. And it soon became evident that our chances were slim at best. People were vanishing, turning up dead, killed in gruesome ways… I think your assessment of my motivation for searching out company in the clubs is spot on. Death was a real possibility at any time.”

It had been an intense time. Filled with excitement, battles, the feeling of doing the right thing, fighting the just fight.

Sirius shook his head. “The foolhardy recklessness that led me to run away from home, join the Aurors, and fight as part of a vigilante group, also led to me being arrested and sent to prison. I had a lot time to think in my cell. And since I was freed by the actions of Lord Slytherin… I’m still working on growing up.” Sirius dared to look up at Olivienne, only now noticing how he had avoided looking at her while talking about his past. She had a mask in place that would easily hold up to any Ministry function or Wizengamot meeting. There was nothing to read there but polite interest.
“The fact that I was still in line for the Black Lordship and all the influence and wealth that comes with that, was unexpected. But as my godson – Harry Potter, you may have heard of him by the moniker of the-boy-who-lived – was adopted by Lord Slytherin and I was confronted with the need to do something to help him, I accepted the responsibilities I once ran from.” Sirius sighed again. There was no way Olivienne would agree to let him meet the twins. “I try to do good with the influence I now have. I want to improve laws governing the rights of children and those affected by lycanthropy, right wrongs done in the past. I’m not sure that it’s working, but I try.”

Sirius fell silent, and after a few moments started to eat his pastry, so he wouldn’t get up from his seat and start pacing.

Why wasn’t she saying anything?

“Well, this gives me a good overview of what you think about yourself. But not one reason why you think it is a good idea for you to meet my daughters.” And still there was the calm and intense tone in her voice.

Restraining his errant thoughts which wanted to run down totally inappropriate pathways – that voice in the bedroom, a shame he couldn’t remember – Sirius nodded. She was right. “Yes. Now that I know that I’m a father, I feel that it’s my responsibility to offer them the possibility to get to know me. They are old enough to decide for themselves if they want to stay in contact with me. I dearly hope that they will allow me to be part of their life. Much too late, I realise, but as neither of us knew where the other was... “ Sirius trailed off. He would have loved to claim that he would have acted differently that night – not chasing after Peter – had he known about the twins, but he wasn’t all that sure, and didn’t dare lie. He shifted in his seat, the leather of the bench creaking, and placed his hands flat on the table to stop himself from drumming them nervously.

“I see that you are now enough of an adult to dress respectably,” Olivienne said with a smirk and a wave indicating his suit.

Sirius chuckled despite himself. “I have a good friend I can ask for advice if I need to dress for something other than a Quidditch match, or a visit to the bars and clubs.” Removing a piece of imaginary lint, Sirius smoothed a small fold in the sleeve of his jacket. “Dressing the part of a responsible adult isn’t easy, but I’m willing to learn.”

“I fear that will have to be enough.” Olivienne said, suddenly serious again. “I’ll write to the girls and see if they want to meet with you. As they are currently in school, we will have to arrange something with the school if they don’t want to wait till the next holidays. Until then,” she got out a notepad and a pencil, “I wish to know more about what being an heiress entails. What comes with being part of the Black family, and what other things might impact the girls if they should agree to this.”

Getting out a few documents Sirius had prepared in advance, he started to answer all that Olivienne wanted to know. He had changed the rules regarding the appointment of an heir only slightly to include a clause removing the need to have graduated from Hogwarts. He indeed had been surprised to find that no one could be excluded based on gender, or being born outside of a marriage, paired with the requirement of attending Hogwarts, it had been a curious mix. Especially if compared to some of the rules other families had. Slytherin needed a boy speaking to snakes as an heir, the rules were truly absurd in some cases.

They spoke for hours before they went their separate ways with the promise to keep in contact.
Saturday, 27th of January 1996

“Man, why would you stay here? It’s a Hogsmeade weekend!” Ron complained after Harry had explained to his friends that he was heading up to the Hospital Wing. “And I thought we could all go together. As a group.”

Harry rolled his eyes at his friend. “No one keeps you from going as a group when I stay behind, Ron. I have an appointment with Mrs. Goyle, and lessons with Professor Snape after that.” They had reduced the number of sessions for Occlumency lessons as Harry managed better and better. But as he expected the meeting with Marvolo to stir up feelings, generally being unsettling, Harry had asked the Professor if he would be willing to help him meditate after the meeting was finished.

Surprisingly enough, the Potions Master had agreed. For all that old resentments between them sometimes flared, they both got along much better now.

“Can’t you move the appointment?” Ron almost whined, making Harry wonder why it seemed so important that Harry go with them.

Waving at where the others slowly were drifting towards the gate – only Neville and Hermione still lagging behind – Harry asked with more than a little incredulity. “If you want to go as a group, then why are you standing here, by me, when I’m staying at the castle, and those going to the village are almost out the door?”

With a hastily called goodbye, Ron ran after the others, leaving Harry standing in front of the doors to the Great Hall, shaking his head. Ron was odd sometimes.

Harry turned and walked up the big staircase surrounded by the younger Gryffindors and Ravenclaws on their way back to the tower, excited to have their common rooms mostly to themselves as the older students were down in the village for at least the morning.

When Harry arrived at the Hospital Wing, Madame Pomfrey smiled at him, waving in the direction of the room that they typically used for their sessions. “They’re both already here. I’ll make sure that you’re not disturbed.”

Harry nodded his thanks, walked up to the door – which was closed and probably warded – and knocked on it.

“Come in!” Harry was called to enter by Mrs. Goyle, and so he did.

He felt more nervous than he had in awhile. A feeling that was only slightly lessened when he came to see the familiar setup of art supplies, comfortable seating, and beverages to help soothe a dry throat.

“Hello, Mrs. Goyle.” Harry bowed in her direction, turned after she had returned his greeting so he was looking at Marvolo where he sat with a cup of tea in hand, and hesitated only for a fraction of a second. “Father.”

“Hello, Henry.” Marvolo greeted back, and Harry thought he might have seen a flicker of uncertainty in the other’s eyes. Dismissing this as a trick of the light, Harry walked over to the last
empty armchair in the triangular arrangement, and sat down.

For a moment no one said a word, and Harry felt decidedly out of place for all that he had been the one to ask for this opportunity.

Finally Madame Goyle started the conversation for them, filling her role as mediator and moderator. “We are here because Harry has asked for an opportunity to talk about a few things on his mind with Lord Slytherin, face to face. I have signed the contract binding what might be said here today under even more stringent protections than the other agreement of confidentiality I signed at the beginning of our sessions. So, if Lord Slytherin is happy with the wards on this room, you can proceed, Harry.”

Being put on the spot like that wasn’t exactly helpful, so Harry jumped to ask the question that came to him at the mentioning of an additional secrecy contract. “You signed another contract, Mrs. Goyle?”

She nodded with a serious expression. “I did.” Before Harry had to ask the obvious follow-up question the therapist continued of her own volition. “It seemed to be the sensible decision, considering what might come up in this discussion, and that helping you and your father work through this will do our society more good than my responsibility to inform law enforcement of dangerous plans I might get information on, could.”

This statement was delivered in such a calm manner that Harry needed a moment to decipher that she actually had decided to keep crimes secret from the Aurors, because she believed that was better for everyone in the long run.

Harry blinked slowly, mostly ignoring the smirk on Marvolo’s face, preparing a cup of tea to his preferences. “Right.” That certainly set the stage for what he wanted to talk about. “It’s actually quite hard to speak about.” If something was hard, start by saying it is. This technique had helped getting into a flow a few times already, so Harry used it almost without actually thinking about it. “There have been hints, of course. Actually, some of them were pretty obvious. Like when one of my calls interrupted a meeting, or how the Healer, or the Professor, bow from time to time when in private… But the fact that the Death Eaters still exist in some capacity I’m not sure about, makes it harder for me to accept that… my wishes and feelings regarding how Marvolo and I interact have changed so much.” Ignoring – if even only a bit – that Marvolo actually sat right there next to him, helped talking, and Harry felt that he was starting to be carried away by his words, no longer needing to force them out, but actually trying to keep up with them.

Harry only registered vaguely that a hand raised by Mrs. Goyele stopped Marvolo from interrupting the flow of words, now easily coming forth.

“How can I accept and keep silent about a man who tortured others into insanity, getting a second chance to live as a secretary? While my friend is almost an orphan because his parents are in hospital, barely aware? How can it be that I feel worry about the man in whose name all those atrocities were committed?”

His desperation became pretty obvious in his tone, his pleading for a way to cope with those conflicting feelings. The guilt, the happiness.

“Because it’s great that someone actually cares about my grades, how my day was, what my plans are. But while most of the bad things happened in the past, done by Voldemort, Marvolo isn’t the law-abiding man he pretends to be. Or is he?” The last was directed with quite a bit of force towards Marvolo, who still held his cup of tea delicately in his hands. His wand nowhere in sight.
Harry’s green eyes were fixed on Marvolo, tracking every movement the man made.

“I’m not sure if I really understand the divide you’re feeling.” Marvolo sounded cautious, speaking slowly, as if he was tasting the words, weighing them to see if they matched what he wanted to say. “And I’m not sure I can provide the reassurance you need. But I’m willing to try.”

Harry sat on the edge of his seat, hands wrapped around the armrests, gripping maybe a tad too hard. He was willing to listen, as Marvolo really was a different man. Voldemort never would have even considered speaking about this. Hell, the man never would have treated Harry with even a shred of the attention or kindness he had been displaying more and more regularly.

“As I told you, the Dark Mark was created by my using a bunch of different spells, bindings, and rituals, taking what I wanted and mixing in whatever I found might be useful. At the heart of it all is the old fealty binding spell that was used by our family back in the time when families bound themselves in service to another, more powerful, family to the mutual benefit of them both.” Harry nodded because that was in fact something that Marvolo had told him before, trying to explain why he hadn’t handed over the escapees the moment he had found them. “Many have been led astray by what I told them while I was Voldemort. I harmed them. Erased all the potential good they might have done, because my actions landed them in prison in the end. To take your example, Barty had serious trouble with his father. He never was good enough, didn’t get any of the affection and attention he needed. I used that to get him to do my bidding, to warp him and his view of the world to my ends.” Shakily setting his cup down, Marvolo folded his hands in his lap, gripping so hard that his knuckles turned white. “And he wasn’t the only one. Your godfather’s younger brother. He had potential. My actions led to his death, led to the deaths of many people, all of whom could have done good, would have done something to influence our society.” Marvolo looked up from the floor he had been staring at and locked eyes with Harry. “My bond to them as my vassals compels me to right the wrong I have caused them. The vow I made as Lord Slytherin binds me to doing what I think is best for our society. Killing or causing the deaths of even more people isn’t what is best, I clearly believe that. Everyone who can have a positive impact on our world should get a chance to do so.” He swallowed. “I know you have realised how some tactics that the most righteous of people would condemn for being unfair, or underhanded, or just this side of illegal, are needed to get things done.”

Marvolo paused, and Harry realised after an awkward, tense moment that he was waiting for a confirmation. So Harry nodded. “Grandfather Potter has said as much, as has Madame Longbottom. She said that some people are just disagreeable out of spite, disagreeing with everything one person brings before the Wizengamot just because they have brought it forward. And that sometimes it’s necessary to outmanoeuvre them. But that doesn’t include murder.” Of the last point Harry was certain, even if other stuff he had been sure about in the past had vanished in a confusing mess of grey.

Marvolo inclined his head in a contemplating manner. “Maybe not. But you need to know that in the times this spell of fealty was created, it fell under the Lord’s purview to decide how one of his people should be punished if they broke his law.”

Now it was Harry who swallowed. He might have known that in an abstract sense. They had talked about early British history in school. But hearing a teacher say something about a regional Lord having the jurisdiction under their control was vastly different from a man sitting just a chair over, telling Harry he felt justified deciding if someone had to die because they had committed to being in service to the man.

“There has to be a better way!” Startled by his own outburst, which had made him stand and take a step towards Marvolo, hands balled to fists at his sides, Harry shakingly opened his hands and took
a step back, almost falling back into his chair with a huff.

A mirthless laugh from Marvolo startled Harry even more. “I’m not sure if you’ll believe me, but I did try to find another way to cope with Bellatrix and her madness.”

Harry felt a brow rise in silent query when the old Lord Yaxley wasn’t mentioned together with the mad aunt of Draco. So Marvolo had tried to find a way to help Bellatrix Lestrange, but no way to avoid killing Yaxley? “And I shall believe that the old Yaxley killed himself out of shame?” The scepticism was so thick in his voice that even Ron would have noticed, one of the least Slytherin of all the people Harry knew well in their year.

“The investigation clearly showed that he was the one handling the phial containing the deadly substance. There was no evidence of force found,” Marvolo answered, and Harry just knew that other had been there, pressuring the wizard to kill himself. It was in the way he held himself, the way he spoke, the inflection some of the words were spoken with. It wouldn’t hold up in court, but Harry was sure nonetheless.

Funny how one learned to read people by simply keeping company of people doing the same constantly.

“We both know that a true Slytherin with enough time would make sure not to be caught.” Harry tried for a collected tone, but was pretty sure his effort fell short as he noticed a small, short flicker of amusement on Marvolo’s face.

Would the other answer truthfully? The fact that Madame Goyle had been asked to sign another contract indicated that he intended to do so, at least. “Where is the difference between Bellatrix Lestrange, killing many, torturing two people into madness, escaping from prison, and a man leading a life conforming with society's expectations – at least on the surface – that makes one worth saving and the other not?”

Harry felt himself breathing faster, as if he had run to make it to a class, while he waited for Marvolo to answer him. A small part of him still expected to be told off for daring to ask questions – thankfully that part had gotten smaller since the summer – making him tense and anxious.

“Well spotted, and a good question.” Marvolo’s praise came unexpectedly, and Harry hadn’t really much time to regain his footing before Marvolo continued to speak, not giving any hints to how he might be feeling about all of this. “Nothing Bellatrix did before or shortly after my fall went against the orders she had been given. Once I was back, having regained enough sanity to feel the demands of the bond between her and me, I started to feel pressure to do something about my failing her.” He paused just long enough for it to be noticeable, “And the others.

“I tried everything I could come up with to help her. Only sacrificing her for the good of the others once there was no avenue left, and she started to go against my newer orders.”

Once again Marvolo had his eyes trained on the floor, his hands gripping tensely at each other, the pale wand nowhere in sight. “Corban Yaxley, on the other hand, acted against clear orders more than once.” Harry remembered the fact that Septimus had been ordered by his uncle to marry a witch once he had graduated from Hogwarts even though he knew that Septimus had no interest in women as he was gay, going against an order Marvolo had given out. But what other order had he disobeyed?

There had been those witches abducted by a few wizards. One of those wizards had been Corban’s son, if Harry wasn’t mistaken. Did the late Lord Yaxley have something to do with that?
Nodding, Marvolo confirmed Harry’s thoughts, probably following them by reading Harry’s facial expressions. A little chagrined, Harry realised that he had let his guard down quite a bit, as he did every time he went to one of the mind-healing sessions. “Yaxley seemed to think that the way those young wizards acted was right and in accordance with my will. I couldn’t let that stand, because I do not condone kidnapping, rape, and slavery.”

In the wake of that forceful declaration, silence settled on the room.

Harry tried to sort his thoughts. Would the Aurors have made the connection between the late Lord Yaxley and his son’s actions? The man had managed to evade Azkaban after Voldemort had fallen. He probably would have claimed that his son was a big disappointment and that he had known nothing.

One thing about the current system of wizarding Britain was pretty clear to Harry by now: if you had money and a respectable family name, you could get away with a lot.

And hadn’t he decided to let some things go?

“Under what circumstances would you consider killing another human?” Harry asked the question without really acknowledging the reasons for why he wanted to know.

Marvolo thought for a moment, picking his cup back up – which started to steam once again – taking a sip, before answering. “In a situation where I would be forced to defend myself or others, I might feel that there’s no other way. But I have noticed while defending the Burrow, that it would need to be a really skilled opponent, or many of them, to leave only lethal means as a way to keep those safe who I want to keep safe. Currently I’m just so good that there are few who could pose a challenge to me.” A clear smirk graced Marvolo’s face. “Why deny myself the challenge by using spells that are easy to cast, but lethal, when I can capture and incapacitate aggressors?”

Was that good enough?

Hermione probably would have bristled because Marvolo hadn’t simply said killing was wrong and he would avoid it at all costs.

But just as only ignoring a bully wouldn’t stop them or keep them from bullying a more entertaining or easier target, claiming to never to be able to kill because it was wrong, fell short of the truth, ignoring some important points.

Was their situation perfect? No.

Was it easy? How could it have been?

But maybe it was good enough.

Marvolo was willing to explain himself to Harry, and his reasons seemed sound. More or less, at least.

“I feel that we have become a family since the summer. As much as we probably can at this point.”

Once again Harry was picking his path carefully, trying to avoid possible pitfalls and stumbling blocks. “And once Marcus comes to be part of that family… His question why you call me Henry when my name is Harry got me thinking… I want you to call me Harry.” Now it was out. And suddenly the fear that Marvolo would reject that offer, even when he had said he wanted to be invited to use “Harry”, overshadowed everything else. It would be horrible to be rejected now. If Marvolo refused to accept their closeness, denied it had been happening, Harry wasn’t sure what he would do.
That fear vanished as fast as it had materialised when Harry saw the open, blinding smile on Marvolo’s face. “I thank you, Harry, for granting me this privilege. And I hope you realise that I’m willing to answer all questions you might have, or at least that I’m willing to listen to them all, should you ask something I’m not at liberty to discuss. Even regarding those individuals bond to me by the fealty spell. It only recently occurred to me that once I have undone all those rituals keeping me tied to this world, it’s quite possible that I might die before all of those bond to me die, which would lead to their bonds falling to you as my heir.”

Horror at the thought of being the one in charge of Barty Crouch, or the two Lestrange brothers, the Carrows, his Potions Professor, overshadowed his joy that Marvolo had accepted to use his nickname.

Harry later wasn’t really sure how he had managed to get to the Potions classroom where Professor Snape was already waiting for him, leading him into a deep meditation Harry so desperately needed right now. He only knew for sure that somehow Luna had been waiting for him, being a calming presence at his side the whole way down to the dungeons.

ooOoo

After Marvolo had retrieved his wand from the ornate box Madame Goyle had brought with her, he said goodbye to Harry – it felt so good to be finally able to use the more familiar address – who clearly seemed to be quite distracted and beside himself, and made his way to the edge of the grounds.

Instead of going home to Griffin House, Marvolo apparated to Headquarters, where he walked into the duelling room.

While he had made sure all secrets would be safe, speaking about all of that with Harry, witnessed by the Mind-Healer, had been nerve-wracking. Confronting his own feelings, his errors of the past, was terrifying. Harder than fighting of a Lethifold, or seeing a boggart take on the form of his own corpse.

Would that still happen?

Marvolo conjured up a statue made from porcelain in the form of a faceless man just to let it explode into a cloud of fine, white dust. He needed to get rid of the nervous energy that had build up over the duration of the conversation.

Having feelings was so damn hard. But it brought so much good along with it.

Ceasing to think for a while, Marvolo just conjured and destroyed one faceless statue after another until he finally was so tired that he felt calm at last.

Chapter End Notes

I’m sure at least a few of you expected a much more violent confrontation. But Marvolo and Harry have spent so much time working on their coping mechanisms,
their ability to keep their tempers, ways to work through their problems, that they just wouldn’t let me write a confrontation getting out of hand. I kind of like this restrained but somehow still tense confrontation with a silent referee at the sidelines :D

And for another question: one Reviewer asked for translations to be presented right after the piece of text in a language other than English. I’m torn about that and would like to know what you all think on that. Break the flow by providing a translation right then and there? Or make you skip and possibly ignore the content of a piece of foreign language text providing a translation for the curious at the end of the chapter?

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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By the time Olivienne had reached the gate to the school grounds she was already on edge. Since the first time she had had contact with the European magicals she had felt unhappy with the way they treated her, the magicless muggle. Her tante – her mother’s friend – never had looked down on her like the Europeans did.

Trailing behind the teacher who had been waiting for her at the gates, Olivienne remembered how the friendly smiles had reassured her at first. But soon she learned to sort the magicals she met into three categories. The ones that were indifferent to her lack of magic – by far the group she could tolerate the best – those that hated her just for the fact that she had no magic herself – just more of the hate she had experienced during her studies for the colour of her skin – and those that were truly curious, but treated her like a small child, unable to make intelligent decisions.

Somehow the last group was even worse than those who hated her, or displayed disdain.

As a black woman studying science, and as a woman and unmarried mother, too often others had taken a position of superiority over her. Claimed things simply untrue, ridiculed her for her errors, her lack of common sense. It had left her defensive about herself, her work, her daughters, each and every decision she had ever made.

And even now walking through the halls of the spacious and wondrous manor – or maybe a big château nestled into a beautiful valley between high mountains – the students, both young and older, whispered behind her back, pointing at the muggle, never letting her forget that this as well was a world she didn’t fit in.

Just like Paris, her chosen field of science, the church groups for mothers… she never fit.

Taking a deep breath to calm down, Olivienne stepped into the room reserved for meetings between students and their family members.

“I will inform your daughters, Doctor Moreau. Please wait here.” The teacher nodded in her direction and closed the door.

The room was beautifully appointed. Precious woods, carved in delicate patterns, as well as silk covered the walls where they weren’t buried behind shelves filled with leather bound books, or moving paintings. Several big and tall glass doors led out to a balcony and revealed the view over a snow covered park, woods in the distance, and what had to be a vegetable garden.
Having grown up in a well-off family all this grandeur wasn’t something truly new. But just by looking at her, people tended to put her into the getting-by box. The fact that her mother had chosen to move into a smaller home, leaving the bigger, more stately house to her daughter and granddaughters, tended to cater to those impressions.

In Olivienne’s opinion, the tendency to judge strangers and place expectations on them was one of humanity’s biggest failures.

As the door behind her opened and she heard two set of feet coming quickly nearer, she turned away from the windows and greeted her daughters, smiling.

“Maman!” both of her little girls called out and only a fraction of a second later they were in each other’s arms, relishing the nearness no amount of letters could give them.

The door was closed and the three of them were alone, simply happy to be back together.

Because of the costs of international travel and the effects of jet-lag, the twins didn’t come home for the shorter holidays all that often.

When they finally separated again, sitting down on two love-seats placed at an angle next to each other, Olivienne saw that her little girls were more than eager to learn what she had to say about the meeting between her and the twins’ father.

“I have met with Lord Sirius Orion Black, and to give you the most important information up front: he has proven to me that he is worthy to make an attempt at being your father,” Olivienne stated in a factual tone.

She felt a little offended when both Enora and Nawel looked at each other and started to laugh. They were laughing so hard that they had to cling to each other to prevent falling to the floor.

“What’s so funny?” Olivienne almost flinched when her words came out sharper than she had intended.

“Maman,” there was found exasperation in Enora’s voice, while Nawel still chuckled, “the way you said that. You grilled him? I’m sure the poor man must have been highly uncomfortable.”

Olivienne gave an uncomfortable smile, and conceded the point with a nod. She tended to make sure people around her were unsure of themselves, wrong footed, when she was in a position placing her at a disadvantage, or making her feel insecure.

In some situations it worked in her favour quite well. But it had cost her a few opportunities when she came off as too antagonistic when applying for positions at universities and for jobs.

“Maybe I did,” Olivienne admitted with an impatient wave of her hand. “But that’s not the point right now.”

“What kind of person is he?” The curiosity mixed with equal parts caution and fear in that one, loaded, question reminded Olivienne why she had searched for the drunk, charming, polite, but still rebellious young man once she was sure she was pregnant.

Each child should have the opportunity to get to know both parents.

“He’s trying hard to grow up.” Thinking back to the meeting she had with him, Olivienne tried to be factual, not influencing her daughters either way. They would decide for themselves if they wanted to meet the man or not. “Working to fulfil the responsibilities coming with his place in
society. Using that influence to do some good. He has a godson around your age, but no other children.” She got out the notebook she had used during the meeting with Sirius and parchments he had brought with him. “These are things regarding the expectations of an heiress, rules of the family, and other things along those lines. I’ll leave them with you so you can read them.” Placing the items on the low table next to the love-seats, Olivienne fixed her girls with a stern look. “Do you want to meet him? And please be honest. Meeting him one time doesn’t mean that you have to accept his offer. And not wanting to meet him right now will not remove the possibility of meeting him later.”

Olivienne watched her daughters look at each other, doing that silent communication thing old couples, best friends, and twins seemed able to do, before they each took one of the scrolls.

So they probably weren’t prepared to decide yet.

Fine by her. It was Sunday, they had a lot of time still before she had to leave again.

oooOOooo

After a leisurely morning, and sleeping in, Harry’s group of friends gathered in one of the unused classrooms to practice. Hermione insisted every day that they needed more practical experience so they would be able to perform the spells during their OWLs practical exam.

No one had been able to come up with an argument to counter that – Harry wasn’t even sure that they had tried to find one – so they all had agreed to meet after lunch.

There had been treacle tart for pudding, and Harry felt a little sluggish with all the food he had eaten. It made him slower in casting his shields against Theo and Draco, who cast several of the less dangerous spells they had to practice for defence at him. They had yet to land even one of their spells.

“Break!” Theo called letting his arm fall to his side, giving an eye roll and a smirk. Draco shook his arm to loosen the muscles, grimacing. “I have a feeling we might need more people to land a spell on you, Harry. All that teaching for the Defence Club seems to help with the speed.” Theo filled a glass from one of the pitchers they had collected from the kitchen, before he sat down on a table next to where Harry was standing.

Harry felt a little conflicted over the fact that he seemed that much faster at defensive spells than his friends, or any of their year-mates for that matter. It just was another thing to set him apart. Something he still felt bad about, making it something he needed to work on. Standing out had been something almost guaranteed to cause trouble either with his aunt and uncle, or Dudley and his friends. While he no longer felt the need to underperform in school – something he had been doing without really noticing – thanks to Madame Goyle's help, standing out in other ways still held a lot of negative memories for Harry.

But it felt great to be good at more than Quidditch!

Draco got himself something to drink as well and walked over to a basket the elves had pressed on them, filled with a number of snacks, from oranges, to different nuts, and baked goods, to get himself something to eat.

“You’re using incantations while practising? Shouldn’t you also practice silent casting?” Theo was
speaking low enough that the others wouldn’t hear what they were talking about.

Feeling self conscious, Harry shrugged, taking a sip from his water. “Don’t want it to get out to the whole school that I cast silently. And I’m not about to try it again without the stress of the situation but with an audience. That would be a disaster about to happen.” Everyone knew that witches and wizards under stress sometimes were capable of casting spells they couldn’t manage under any other circumstances. Harry highly suspected that this was such a case. Which was the reason he hadn’t told Marvolo anything about it, even though he knew that Professor Snape most likely had reported on the incident.

Theo nodded, setting the now empty glass down. “Silent casting will be required starting next year. Can’t hurt to start practising, can it? Maybe in our dorm this evening?”

Harry nodded, that sounded like a good idea. No sense ignoring what had happened, or not starting early when he still could vaguely remember how it had felt to cast those spells silently. “Help me with my switching spells?” Transfiguration was a hard subject and unlike Defence, he had still trouble with quite a few of the things they needed to know for their OWLs.

Theo nodded and they set up the materials they would need to practice their spells, when on the other end of the classroom they were using a loud argument drew everyone’s attention.

“Our! Who do you think you are?” Hermione seemed at the end of her patience. Not something that Harry had seen happen all that often, and mostly not in such a loud fashion.

“I thought we were going as a group! And then you vanished! With, with, with Krum! How could you do something like this!” Ron was equally as unhappy, his face taking on a terrible shade of red. It clashed with his hair something terrible.

Scolding himself for such an unhelpful thought, Harry cautiously moved over where a circle was quickly cleared around the two friends shouting at each other.

“So you have a problem with me meeting up with Victor? Grow up, Ronald! I have the right to chose whom I spend time with. I spent time with my friends from school. Including you! And then I spent time with a friend who came all the way here just to meet with me!” Hermione’s hair was bushier than it had been when they had arrived here and Harry wondered if it might be reacting to her obvious anger. This was taking on a shape that seemed to be getting clearer.

“I thought if we went as a group, we would spend all the time together!” Ron sounded a little bit desperate, terribly disappointed, trying to cover it up with anger. Harry hadn’t seen many of his friends the evening before. After the therapy session he had worked with Professor Snape, and after that he had slept, skipping dinner only to find a snack at his bedside when he woke later in the evening.

“We never did that!” Hermione threw up her arms, her tone incredulous. “Neither you nor Harry ever wanted to stay that long in the bookshop. Shall I make you stay by my side, looking at books the next time we go as a group?” That question had been heavy with sarcasm, raising several brows with surprise. She hadn’t given the impression of being one to understand sarcasm to the Slytherins in their group.

“We spend all our time with books during the week! That one weekend we get to go to the village, why can’t you spend that with me!” And that was the crux of the matter. Harry was pretty certain about that. Ron had wanted Hermione to go with him, but hadn’t asked.

“But we went as a group, Ronald! Make up your mind, will you?” Now Hermione looked tired, and
Harry felt with her, keeping up such high levels of emotion was exhausting.

From one moment to the next the tension in the air dropped, the cautionary circle around Ron and Hermione broke, and Harry dared moving a little more in their direction.

Ron was rubbing his neck, clearly embarrassed. “You’re right. Can’t read minds, can you?” Not looking at Hermione, but the floor near her feet, Ron took a few deep breaths and then blurted a question out, as if he wanted to get it out before his courage would run out. “Come with me to Hogsmeade the next time we get to go?”

Ron didn’t see it, because his eyes still were glued to the floor, but Harry had a clear view of Hermione’s confusion, morphing into realisation, moving quickly from surprise to pity in the time it took her to process that Ron basically had asked her on a date. The next Hogsmeade weekend was planned for February, the first Saturday after Valentine’s Day and therefore the day the village would be crawling with people holding hands and staring into each other’s eyes.

Idly asking himself if he wanted to go, and who he would ask, Harry watched Hermione searching for words, while Ron got more uncomfortable by the second.

He could only wait and see how it would develop. Trying to intervene would probably only make things worse, if he had even known how to intervene.

Taking a deep breath Hermione started to speak. “You’re a good friend, and I like spending time with you, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to go on a date together.” That had been rather blunt.

Harry’s eyes moved over to watch Ron’s reaction. The red-head first got really pale, only to then flush, before he turned on his heel and fled from the room, leaving his things behind.

For a moment Harry and the others stood there, blinking, unsure what to do. Hermione blushed, turned to Daphne and started to ask questions about the blonde’s take on a specific set of rules for vampires that one early version of the Wizengamot had tried to get in place.

Taking her cue, Harry turned to Theo and Draco, waving at their setup for practising switching spells, walking over.

The rest of the afternoon Harry tried to concentrate on his spells, watching what the others did, practising himself, but more than once his mind got distracted with the question if he should have gone after Ron.

But what should he say? What could he say?

Hermione wasn’t interested in Ron, that much was clear. At least to Harry. But there was no tactful way to tell that to Ron. His friend probably would want to talk Hermione down, make her out to be uninteresting. That tactic was something Harry had seen in the past. Boys and girls rebuffed by someone they had been interested in, talking trash about that other person so they could feel better about themselves.

When they left for dinner Harry kept his eyes open to see if Ron would come down to the Great Hall – he rarely missed a meal – but couldn’t spot him. When Ron hadn’t made an appearance when dinner ended, Harry carefully got the attention of the twins, and met them near the Gryffindor table.

“Hey there, Harrykins! What’s up!” the twin walking a step before the other greeted with a cheerful wave.
“What can we do for our favourite Slytherin?” asked the other twin, grinning from ear to ear.

His mood lightened by the pranksters’ antics, Harry smiled despite himself. “Ron got a basket from Hermione this afternoon. In front of an audience. Haven’t seen him since then. Maybe you can help him?” Harry felt so out of his depth with this situation. He had learned to dance, and had been to a few balls with Daphne as a friend. But she had asked him, so Harry was sure he still was as big an idiot about girls as he had been before the ball.

That information dimmed the cheerful aura around Fred and George, while they both nodded. “Thanks, Harry. We’ll find him, talk with him.”

The other twin looked thoughtful for a moment before he asked a question in an almost whisper. “Can we borrow that useful parchment of yours?”

Silently calling himself all kinds of fool, Harry nodded. He should have thought of that himself. It wouldn’t have solved the problem with what to say to Ron, but he would have been able to find him.

Luckily Harry carried the Marauder’s Map with him most of the time, especially on weekends, so he was able to get it out and hand it over. “They’re both my friends… Please let me know how it goes?”

“We know how it is. Don’t worry too much, Harrykins!” Stashing the map in a pocket, the twins winked at Harry and walked away.

With a sigh Harry walked out of the Great Hall, turning into the corridor leading down to the dungeons. Hopefully his inaction this afternoon wouldn’t cost him Ron’s friendship. Harry walked down and arrived as the last of the fifth-year boys in the dorm.

Practising silent casting with the others down in the dorms proved to be a good distraction.

And a good way to let Harry fall asleep fast. He was so tired by the time he went to bed that he barely managed to brush his teeth and change into his pyjamas before he crawled into his comfortable bed.

Monday, 29th of January 1996

Because he had had trouble getting up – practising silent casting after an afternoon reviewing had taken it out of him – Harry and his friends were late to breakfast. Not that anyone would comment on it, as almost everyone was late some days, but it meant that both Ron and Hermione were already in the Great Hall, eating breakfast.

While Harry searched his own place at the Slytherin table, the older years much more accommodating than they had been before he had hexed the upper years – he hadn’t thought that was even possible – he flicked his eyes from Hermione to Ron and back.

They sat at different ends of the table, studiously ignoring each other. In fact they almost sat with
their backs to each other, quite a feat while sitting at the same table but not sitting sideways.

“You can’t help them sort that out, Harry,” Theo said, tugging on Harry’s sleeve, prompting him to sit down. So Harry did.

After a rather hasty breakfast of toast with honey, scrambled eggs, an apple, and a goblet of milk, they all got up and moved with the majority of the students to the exit of the Great Hall. They had to get to classes.

Just as Harry and the others passed through the door, someone ran into Harry. For a moment he was confused, then he felt parchment in his hand, heard a whispered “Greetings from Ron,” and then the one who had run into him was gone again.

A quick look confirmed that he held the Marauder’s Map in his hand, so it probably had been one of the twins, giving him back the map, and passing on a greeting from Ron.

Resigning himself to ask after his two friends in breaks between classes, Harry hurried after Theo and Daphne.

oooOOooo

An urgent floo call from the Minister had ended Marvolo’s breakfast earlier than he would have liked. He hadn’t flooed into the Minister’s office right away, because he had to pick up a questionnaire he had to fill in, and he wanted to get it done. It was high time that Marcus finally could come home.

Now he had the thick scroll of parchment in his pocket – he wasn’t really sure how many questions there would be to answer – and the elevator he had been in stopped at the right level. “Level One, Minister’s office and Minister Support Staff.” Marvolo wondered – not for the first time – who had been the witch speaking those sentences. Or was it a completely artificial recording?

Percy Weasley was manning the desk of the secretary in front of the Minister’s office. The lanky red-head stood when Marvolo came through the double-width door separating the corridor from the rooms of the Minister’s office. “Lord Slytherin, the Minister is waiting for you.”

Marvolo squashed the urge to answer with a flippant I know, and nodded, quickly walking past the young man towards the door to Cornelius’ office. With a little wave of his hand Marvolo opened the door and stepped in.

He walked in on Cornelius sitting behind his desk, drinking something hot from a cup, and shaking his head, while looking down on something on his desk.

“Good morning, Cornelius. You said it was urgent?” They had talked at various opportunities, most recently during the coordination of how to overhaul and repair the adoption process. But as much as Marvolo thought it would be helpful to be among the Minister’s advisers, he wasn’t one.

“Yes. Thanks for coming to the Ministry so early on a Monday morning. I got a letter… but please read it first, before my recounting influences your view on what was written.” Cornelius really seemed flabbergasted, and out of his depth, waving at a letter sitting there in the middle of the desk.
Marvolo walked over, so he could pick the letter up, and so he could get a good look at what else might be on the desk. It wasn’t really anything interesting, but knowing that was worth passing up an opportunity to show off his wandless skills.

He picked up the letter and looked for a signature at the end of the second piece of parchment.


He flipped the page back and began to read, concentrating so he would catch all the layers of meaning he had come to expect from the old wizard.

Marvolo felt his brow inch towards the line of his hair a few times while he was reading the letter that had confused Cornelius. When he reached the part where the old wizard complained about the board of Governors pressuring him on leaving the school, Marvolo looked up and over to where Cornelius was sitting. “The Board is trying to replace him permanently?” Of course he already knew, because Lucius had told him, but Marvolo really wanted to get an impression on how Cornelius took the whole situation.

“As far as I know. And I agree with them. At his age, and with the bad health he has been in recently. Public opinion is against him, and I think it would be a risk to let him return to the school.” Cornelius waved his hand as if he was trying to chase away some annoying fly, clearly thinking the whole issue of the Headmaster of Hogwarts was old hat.

Marvolo only nodded in confirmation that he had heard, and hummed a non-committal sound. He really wanted to keep out of that mess, at least in ways that could be easily linked back to him.

It took a while to get through that letter and read it again two more times. It seemed like a riddle, or maybe it only was the sign of a troubled mind.

“What do you make of that?” Cornelius asked, waving at the letter, the moment Marvolo set the letter down, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Well, he is better. Otherwise he probably would have claimed that I was the one making Dolores Umbridge work on throwing the adoption procedures into disarray.” Marvolo felt amused by what he had read. Confused, a little puzzled, a smidgen annoyed, curious, but amused above all else. Part of that amusement probably had its roots in the miasma of emotions currently swirling in his mind. Would it get even messier in there when he absorbed another of his horcruxes?

Cornelius looked not any happier, but kept silent as Marvolo continued to speak. “I’m having trouble deciding if he wants to get you to tell him what you know of the background of the adoption-mess, or if he wants to cast all the blame on me.” Marvolo sat down in the chair – richly carved and upholstered with silken velvet – across from Cornelius, straightening his robes as he did so. “He started out trying to make you realise that you need to know who started the mess, or more precisely who kept it going once Umbridge was out of the picture. And then he gets on a roll. Claiming I was the one, creating the mess so I could sweep in, playing the hero to repair the damage.” Marvolo snorted, even in the past that wouldn’t have been a plan he would have thought to use. “Not sure what you think, but I can’t really see me in the role of the hero in shining armour. There’s simply too much dark in my past for that.” Marvolo shook his head and registered an easing of Cornelius’ posture.

“He claims I’m working towards a certain goal, and looking at the claims he made, they don’t lack a certain logic, but they aren’t founded in reality in any way I can see. He simply doesn’t provide any proof beside his claims of knowing my character.” Maybe Dumbledore should get into writing fictional books in his old age, he certainly had the imagination needed.
“So you’re not angry?” Cornelius seemed equally relieved and puzzled. “Dumbledore claims that you’re trying to work towards the goal of stealing all magical children from muggle families! He used quite drastic language. And what he suggests you plan for Squibs… I’m not sure…” Words failed to come to the Minister.

Marvolo couldn’t blame him. Really, suggesting Marvolo wanted to make slaves out of Squibs and use them in some sort of convoluted breeding program, it really made one wonder where Dumbledore got those ideas from.

Marvolo shook his head to get rid of the speculating thoughts. “Professor Dumbledore was pretty set against me the moment he met me back at the orphanage. I admit that I didn’t have the best reputation with the staff there, but I would love to know how he would have coped as the only magical person there, being bullied, suspected at every turn, competing with others for limited supplies…” Marvolo trailed off, it would be interesting to see how a young Dumbledore would have developed if thrust into the same circumstances, but the old argument of nurture versus nature wasn’t one Marvolo was going to debate now, or anytime soon.

“What should we do about that letter?” Cornelius asked. “I don’t think it would be wise to just ignore this… this slandering phantasm of a story.”

Marvolo nodded. “I agree. Maybe let someone from the board learn about the letter? You’re not a healer bound by a vow, or in any other way obligated to keep the contents of this letter private.” In fact if the Minister wanted, he could let the letter be printed in the Daily Prophet if he wanted to. “Maybe let the content slip to a few people, if you don’t want to bring it to the Governors directly, but I think it would look better if you did that. Whatever else that letter does, it clearly shows that Albus Dumbledore isn’t fit to be in a position of responsibility for children.”

Now Cornelius’ gaze turned calculating. “And it won’t bother you if what all is hinted at, claimed to be true, and said about you in this letter comes to be wider knowledge, Marvolo?”

How considerate of the Minister.

Marvolo smiled and shook his head. “Those who will believe ill of me based on the past, will do so regardless. Those who judge me on my merits probably won’t be bothered by unfounded accusations. And keeping the children safe, among them my son, Harry, is more important.” It felt good to use Harry’s name out in the open, prove that he had managed to get closer to his son, that they had manage to strengthen their family.

“If you’re certain?”

“I am certain, Cornelius. Thank you for your consideration.”

After that they talked for quite some time more, but none of it was as interesting as the long detailed letter of wild speculation Marvolo’s old Transfiguration Professor had written and sent to the Minister.

On his way to the atrium from where he planned to apparate back home Marvolo walked into Madame Bones and was drawn into a long discussion about the requirements in place to apply to the Auror training program. When they parted with polite wishes for a nice day, Marvolo was truly puzzled. Why would the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement want to speak with a former Dark Lord – as far as she knew – about if it was a good idea to lower the needed NEWT in Potions? Marvolo had agreed with her that Severus was a hard taskmaster where Potions were concerned and even an OWL in his subject would be enough for entry into the program if there was a more basic brewing segment added to the training. He even had suggested that the program
could concentrate on recognizing dangerous brews, and forbidden substances, over brewing as there were dedicated members of the force doing the brewing for the Department.

Pleasantly confused, Marvolo returned to Griffin House intening to fill in the questionnaire as the first step in the process of adopting Marcus.

oooOOooo

With a sigh Sirius placed another letter he had finished off to the side. Managing the family assets was a continuous and boring task. But as he much preferred having money to spend on nice clothes, good food, visits to the clubs of the city, to having to turn over every knut before spending it, there wasn’t much Sirius could do.

Looking over to the clock on the wall – telling the time beside a few other things – Sirius sighed again. The time he had promised Remus to spend on the boring, administrative stuff wasn’t over yet, and Harry was still in lessons so he wouldn’t be available on the mirror either.

Moping wouldn’t get the work done, so Sirius reached for the next letter in his in-basket, trying to shore up his work ethic.

All weariness was forgotten once he glanced down at the envelope, seeing who had sent the letter to him.

It was from Olivienne.

His wand made quick work of the seal on the back of the envelope, and only seconds later Sirius had unfolded the letter.

He snorted.

She certainly would have fit right in with his family's Slytherin tendencies. The whole letter was written in French, a language Sirius had told her he wasn’t fluent in. Neither reading and writing, nor speaking it.

For a moment he searched his brain for the translation spell Lily had all of them learn in their seventh year. She had insisted that they should learn it to get access to a wider variety of spells, suggesting they should each learn a different second language. Remus had managed to convince her that they hadn’t enough time to do so, and should use translation spells in the interim.

When Sirius was sure he wouldn’t remember the spell, he got up from his – surprisingly comfortable – chair and walked over to the shelf that he stored the more useful charms and spell collections in. A few moments later, Sirius had found the right spell and was wandering back to his desk.

The first thing he did was copy the letter over to another piece of parchment, storing the original back into its envelope. It would be a disaster if he miscast the spell and lost the original letter.

Checking with the book, Sirius practiced the wand movement a few times, repeating the incantation in his mind, not really casting just yet.

Then he placed the copied letter in the middle of his desk, removing all other parchments from the
vicinity, so he would be sure to not accidentally translate them, and then cast the spell. A short glance showed that the text was now English, and Sirius set to reading what Olivienne had written.

Sirius

I talked to the twins. They want to meet you, but the school does not allow visits between students and non-family members during school hours. A direct meeting will have to wait until the break week.

But both put the idea at stake, which you could write before. Enora assured me that letters are addressed to her with her name will definitely happen. However, an owl may take some time to fly from southern France to London.

Spring break starts in the second week of April. The time should be enough to find a solution that works for all of us. Please make a suggestion when you are available during this time.

I will go home on Wednesday. If you want to meet me before, please let me know. Maybe I can find a gap in my schedule.

Regards,

Olivienne

All in all, it looked like a fairly smooth translation. With the exception of a few hiccups in the middle. Maybe it would be wise to let Remus have a look before Sirius wrote an answer and made an attempt to write a letter to his daughters.

Of course he had considered that possibility. In fact he was relieved that Olivienne didn’t insist that he send letters to the twins to her first, so she could monitor their conversations. He would feel much better this way.

Getting a scrap parchment – one where he had removed more than one draft already, rendering it rather thin – from the pile off to the side, Sirius made notes of what he might write to his daughters. The first letter should be to both of them, offering them separate letters if they wanted them.

Once the time had moved on to where Harry’s lessons for the day should be over, Sirius took a break from his mad scribbling, and got the mirror out of his robe pocket.

It took a moment but then Harry’s slightly worried face replaced Sirius’ reflection. “Sirius, what’s the matter. I’m on my way down to the dorm, to pack my books away.” And true to his word, Sirius saw the walls moving past Harry, or rather Harry moving past the walls. The view through the mirror had a curious effect on perception.

“I promised Remus that I would finish some of my correspondence, and part of the rest of all that boring stuff that you have to look forward to. But I’m bored and thought it would be more fun to speak with you, godson!” Harry rolled his eyes, making Sirius smile. It was good to see how well Harry was coping with everything, and how happy and healthy he obviously was. That first meeting between them – with Sirius in his other form – near where Lily's sourpuss of a sister was living, still was a dark spot in Sirius’ memories and made an appearance in his nightmares from time to time. At the time he hadn’t really understood what he had seen. But since then he had
learned how Harry had been fleeing the house of Petunia to escape verbal abuse, lacking rations, and too many chores, largely heaped on him by the whale’s sister Marge, or something.

Even with the one facilitating the changes being Lord Slytherin, Sirius was happy that they were taking place.

“One could thing that you still are no older than fifteen, trying to ignore all the homework.” Harry laughed. Someone on Harry’s end of the conversation called something that Sirius couldn’t properly understand. “Go ahead. I’ll walk a little slower, we’ll meet in the common room.” Harry’s attention returned to the mirror and therefore Sirius.

“Beside procrastination, why did you call now?”

Sirius smiled. “I got a letter from Olivienne. She wrote in French, so my translation is from a spell. Not sure how good it really is. But the twins want to meet with me. In the spring holidays, which is in April. Until then I get to write them. But I really don’t know what to write. You know? So I thought, why not ask my godson? He’s just a year older, he surely knows how to talk to girls his age.” Sirius felt himself blush, because he was so aware that he was rambling, but couldn’t stop himself.

Harry laughed. “You’re confusing me with your younger version, Sirius. I’m a disaster speaking with girls who haven’t been my friends for a while. But I guess I can give you some pointers as to what might be useful conversation starters.” Sirius nodded enthusiastically, that sounded like a great idea. “Ask about school. Their favourite subjects, their least favourite. Professors. You can tell them what you liked or disliked at their age. But I guess you should limit the number of stories about pranks to one per letter.”

Sirius took notes, while Harry talked and portraits, lights, and bare walls moved past his head. “You could also ask or talk about Quidditch, offer them to answer question they might have… I guess that might be a good start?” Harry shrugged, still walking and hitching his bag back up on his shoulder.

Sirius nodded. “Thanks. That’s helpful. How is your second term starting? Have they put out the information pamphlets yet?” They slid into one of their normal conversations after that, until Harry reached the dungeons proper, where he insisted on ending the call, as no one not of Slytherin was to know where exactly the entrance was, or the current password to get in. Sirius played up how wounded he felt to not be trusted, but couldn’t stop himself from laughing when Harry pointed out that he was one of the most Gryffindor people Harry had ever met.

It simply was the truth.

With the new input from Harry his letter writing got easier, until he suddenly remembered that the twins spoke French. Would they be able to read a letter he had written in English? Certainly their mother spoke English rather well, but that said nothing about the ability of the girls. Language studies often were less important at magical schools.

ooOoo

When Remus came home from his trip to gather some potions ingredients – he preferred to brew his own medical potions, pain-relief and the like – he found his friend asleep at his desk,
surrounded by many half finished letters by the look of it. With a chuckle he prodded Sirius awake, so he would sleep the rest of the night in his own bed. He would be in a bad mood if he slept at the desk the whole night. And Remus wasn’t willing to spend a day with a grumpy Sirius.

“Come, Padfoot, it’s time for bed.” Guiding his grumbling, only half awake friend into his room, Remus wondered what had been so important or interesting that Sirius had managed to stay in his study so long that he fell asleep at the desk.

He would ask him tomorrow.

oooOoo0oo

With great care Severus helped Sonja in her beautiful woollen robes out of the floo, getting his wand from the holster with a flick of his hand, to cast a spell at them both to get rid of the soot. Travelling such a long distance by floo was a sure way to get your robes covered in soot.

The smile she gave him to that was so radiant that Severus stood there a moment, smiling back, ignoring their surrounding.

Then a polite little cough drew their attention, and they both turned from smiling at each other to see an elf standing there. “Flimm is sorry. Master is wanting you to be in dining room. Food is ready to be eaten!”

A wave of the elf’s hand let their warm clothes move over to a clothes rack where other cloaks, scarves and hats were already sitting. Then he waddled away from them clearly expecting that they would follow.

Sonja gave Severus a shrug with an amused air. Since she had come to Hogwarts and with the time they had spend with the three elves at Prince Manor, she had relaxed in the presence of house-elves, had come to like a few of them quite well, in fact.

So they followed the elf through the hall towards the dining room from where animated voices were to be heard.

Severus had been here before, delivering potions for his Lord’s heir, giving lessons in basic brewing techniques and occlumency to the boy, and reporting to his Lord. But then he had been either in brewing robes, or even his Death Eater garb, not in one of his best sets of robes that he had acquired since he had taken up the title of Lord Prince.

Severus really was curious what the bigger purpose behind this dinner party was. Socialising simply for the sake of spending time with others just didn’t match up with his image of the Dark Lord.

“Ah, Severus, Sonja, welcome to Griffin House. Come in and sit down.” For a moment Severus felt like he had stepped into a warped version of the world he was living in. Then his dark eyes found the blue eyes of his Lord, and he felt the well known presence of the other's mind at the borders of his own. There was the request to go along with this even without prior warning, and the feeling of acknowledging a service rendered, or a task completed dutifully. So Severus smiled, gently squeezed Sonja’s hand on his arm to let her know to go along with this, and returned the greeting with as much warmth as he ever had shown someone in a social context. “Marvolo, it was a welcome distraction to get the invitation for this evening. Thank you very much!”
Severus noticed a few startled flinches at this familiar greeting among the others present for this evening. Lucius was here, as was Lord Lestrange, but there also were more Death Eaters and their spouses present, and no one else. Only Death Eaters, their partners – if they had one – so everyone knew that this casual use of given names was much more important than it would have been if even one of them had been someone different.

With more pleasantries exchanged Sonja and Severus found their places at the long table, close to where the Dark Lord was sitting at the head of the table between Lord Lestrange and Lucius who had his wife sitting at his other side.

Once the first course, a warm hearty soup, was served, Marvolo – getting into a role helped immensely in playing it, so Severus thought the name he had to use – started idle conversation up again, seemingly not paying attention to the other conversations reluctantly starting up around the table. “I’m a little amazed that Minerva McGonagall let the both of you be absent on a school night.”

Sonja grinned as she answered, because Severus had just taken a spoon of soup. “She is clearly indulging us, the newlyweds, with this. And I have to say the support of the whole staff.” She smiled winningly and with a mischievous glint in her eyes up to Severus. “Filius even said Severus and I should get off at least one evening per week.”

There were a few nervous laughs around the table and Severus gave his lovely wife a playful glare, before turning towards the head of the table. “As Aurora was willing to keep an eye on the Slytherins this evening, Minerva was more than willing to allow us the freedom to enjoy an evening away from the castle.”

During another course of the meal – some sort of risotto artfully arranged on a small plate – the conversation drifted from one inane topic to the other. It was polite enough conversation as Severus had come to expect at the beginning of most social events, but couldn’t quite fit with the fact that this was in some way a meeting of Death Eaters and their Lord. Even if the addition of the spouses made it a somewhat more socially acceptable version.

And then suddenly the hints at a pattern Severus had seen the whole evening clicked into place.

The topics revolved around the children of those present.

Only those that had children at school now at this very moment, and most of them in Slytherin, were here. Lord Lestrange had his heiress, Lucius and Narcissa had their son Draco, healer Greengrass had his nieces, Daphne and Astoria, and the others all were parents of students in his House.

“I started the adoption process for young Marcus today. There are questions in that paperwork that are truly ridiculous. Tell me: could you answer in a short and accurate way what a five-year-old wished to take up as a career from one day to the other? Marcus has changed his mind at least three times since I met him the first time. From Dragon Tamer, to Potions Master, to Fireman. Whenever I read him the story of the \textit{Fountain of Fair Fortune}, he insists on becoming a knight when he is grown.” The way Marvolo talked clearly invited the others to share a similar anecdote of their own children, or those they knew well.

“Draco wanted to be a Dragon Tamer for a while, but professional Quidditch Player surely was the favourite for longest.”

After that anecdotes of childish antics came flowing easier, and more than once Narcissa and Lucius, as well as Severus and Sonja, were the targets of more or less friendly teasing about young
children and the hardships they could bring to their parents.

“Adopting a teenager probably spared me a lot of those troubles. But I hope to have some of the more rewarding experiences to share with Marcus once he comes to live here. And I hope he’ll make me as proud as Harry does. I heard recently that he seems to be easily capable of holding his own even against several more experienced students. Isn’t that true, Severus?”

And there it was, the little evil smirk making it clear to everyone that Marvolo – their Lord – was referring to something that hadn’t been a training session during the Defence Club meetings, or a tutoring session sometimes happening between the older and younger students from the House of Slytherin at Hogwarts.

“Oh, it certainly is true. The wards I have on the rooms only activate if there are spells cast in a rapid succession, normally indicating that several people are ganging up on one or two others. As a professor and Head of House I can’t let such things get out of hand. But when I checked, it was pretty obvious that only your son, Marvolo, had been the one casting. And by the looks on the faces of his closest friends, not one of them had been even truly worried, mostly keeping an eye on his back.” Out of curiosity Severus had tried to cast Petrificus Totalus that fast and often in that short a timespan, and had noticed that he couldn’t do it other than silently. The incantation simply was too long to permit anything else. He wasn’t quite sure yet if that truly meant that Harry Slytherin had cast those spells silently. Severus thought it possible that the boy had used a different spell with a shorter incantation.

After that, all those parents of Slytherin upper-years were on the edge of their seats, clearly wanting to check in with their progeny, demanding to know what had happened and how they could have been so careless.

Severus enjoyed himself immensely and gladly helped his Lord brag about the advances the young boy had made in all his classes this year, considering the handicap he had had to fight against all his time at Hogwarts.

It was a happily humming Severus who crawled into bed that evening, greeted by a chuckling Sonja. “I think you truly love to put people on the spot and make them realize their faults and weaknesses, don’t you?”

“I might,” Severus admitted, drawing her into his arms. “But it seems that it’s even more fun when aimed at adults. I’ll have to keep that in mind and try it at the next Wizengamot session.”

Cleaning his mind as he was accustomed to doing, Severus reflected that tag-teaming the parents of those careless students had been great fun, and that he wasn’t averse to repeating the exercise.

Chapter End Notes

I shamelessly admit that I used the translation spell to get out of a decision regarding translations this time. And because I had fun re-creating the effect of automatic magic translation. I wrote the letter in German, let a service translate it into French, and then let that text be translated into English. I feel that automatic translation has gotten much better!

Hope you had as much fun reading this as I had writing it!

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
I want to once again thank all those people leaving comments on my chapters. You help me keep writing through a much too hot summer, bad days, and despite the temptation of new toys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Tuesday, 30th of January 1996*

Idly stirring the spoonful of honey into his coffee, Severus let his gaze wander over the students sitting at the four house tables. Sonja and he had been up at an early hour discussing an article that might be useful in their own quest to find a substitute for the ancestry test the goblins had a monopoly on.

Maybe the author of that article could help them in performing more thorough tests once they had finished the preliminary tests with humans. To get a scale of colours and how to interpret them consistently, they would need much more than only a handful of examples.

Severus let his dark eyes wander over the hall. The students were either lethargic, fighting to wake up enough that they would be able to follow the lectures in the first lesson of their day, or hyperactive. In his years teaching, Severus had watched the transformation from energetic eleven-year-old to sleepwalking teenager many times. Over at the Gryffindor table, the older students were annoyed by the younger students and the Weasley twins. At the Slytherin table the younger students knew better than to disturb the older ones.

The do-not-anger list clearly also included the adopted son of Lord Slytherin, who was eating a balanced meal – he obviously had picked up good habits during the time his meals had been especially catered to his needs during the summer – and talked with the others surrounding him.

If someone had told him just a year prior that the son of James Potter and Lily would sit and talk amiably with the children of Lucius Malfoy, Benjamin Nott, and other suspected Death Eaters, he would have called in the Healers from St. Mungo's.

And now here he was, witnessing that exact scene, and not for the first time, either.

It seemed that the boy had inherited the big, kind heart of his mother, judging by the way he had let go of the past. In becoming friends, if tentatively, with Draco and accepting the Dark Lord as his guardian, Mr. Slytherin had provided ample proof of his capability of forgiveness.

If Severus had to find someone even close to that level of... a forgiving nature, not even Dumbledore would measure up. The old Headmaster had forgiven Severus and given him a second chance, but the fact that Dumbledore had insisted on Severus spying for the Order of the Phoenix, therefore forcing Severus to continue to do things some people would call evil diminished the level of forgiveness considerably.
Redirecting his thoughts to more cheerful topics, Severus took a drink from his coffee and then speared a piece of baked apple from his plate. Sonja was sitting next to him, deep in conversation with Pomona. It seemed as if his wife was haggling to get some cuttings from more rare plants – which were housed in the school’s greenhouses – for their own potions ingredients garden at Prince Manor.

Severus emptied his mug of coffee – contemplating a third one – as the morning post arrived with a mass of owls filling the air with the rustling of many feathers. One unremarkable owl landed carefully near Severus among the bowls and platters of food, expertly avoiding tipping over the pitcher of milk. Slipping a knut into the small pouch attached to the owl's leg, Severus took the newspaper from the bird, not paying it that much attention. They never waited for any affection anyway.

The first thing capturing his attention the moment he had unfolded the newspaper – breaking the waterproofing charm cast on it in an effort to shield the ink – was the headline over the article on the front page.

Dumbledore believes in Conspiracy!

With his brows rising steadily up his forehead, Severus speedily read the article – as always littered with more adjectives and exclamations than should be allowed in a publication claiming to inform about news – to a steadily growing backdrop of murmurs and shocked outcries from the students.

And the reaction was only too easy to understand. After all, the article claimed that Albus Dumbledore had written a letter to the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, claiming that Lord Slytherin was preparing to abduct all muggle-born witches and wizards from their families.

The article used a more colourful language and stretched the whole affair out over way more paragraphs than were strictly needed, but in essence that was what it said.

“Can you believe it! Albus writing such a letter?” Pomona asked in clear distress. Severus rolled his eyes, avoiding making eye contact with anyone least he be dragged into the surely terribly trying conversation to follow.

“Sadly, I can,” Filius spoke up, clearly worried. “I’m curious, though, how the letter came into the hands, or to the notice, of Miss Skeeter, if the claim is true that it was sent to the Minister.”

That was a good question indeed. But judging by the tone the article was going for, Severus thought it might have been intentional. Painting Albus Dumbledore in such a bad light would aid in removing him from the political picture, which clearly would ease the way for the changes the Dark Lord wanted to make.

Sonja reached for the paper Severus still was holding, and with a small smile he let go, so she was able to read the article for herself.

Eating his breakfast in silence, Severus listened to the staff’s reaction, sure that his Lord would be interested to learn what they all had thought and especially said out loud.

He would need to listen in to the chatter of his students to gather a more complete picture, but at the moment this article seemed to have severely shaken the base some had built their trust for the
old wizard on.

As the morning meal was coming to a close, Severus wished Sonja a good day with a kiss right there in front of everyone, and was about to turn to walk out of the Hall when Minerva spoke up. “We’ll have a staff meeting this evening, after dinner.”

Agreeing murmurs were her only answer as the professors dispersed on the way to their classrooms and the first lesson of the day.

ooOoo

Aberforth snorted for the third time in as many minutes. That tickled Albus’ curiosity more than anything had so far this morning. He was waiting for Cornelius to visit, asking for advice, or even help, from Albus on how to act regarding Tom and his plans, which made Albus anxious. He really didn’t like waiting, and found that his stint in hospital hadn’t heightened his patience any. After all, his letter should have reached the Ministry yesterday with the morning mail. There had been plenty of time for Cornelius to react.

“What’s so funny? Don’t make me wait until you have finished the Prophet, Aberforth.” Mock scowling at his brother, Albus reached for the honey pot, planning to spread it on one of the toast slices.

“You did write to Fudge?” Aberforth asked, peering over the top edge of the newspaper.

Albus nodded a little confused. Why was Aberforth asking that? How did he even know?

Aberforth snorted again. “I’ll bet you a good pint of my finest ale that you’ll never guess what happened with your letter.”

Albus blinked, the knife he was using sliding over the toast with a scratching noise. Cornelius had already given a statement to the press? That was unusually forward of the man. “I think you’ll lose that bet, Aberforth. The way you’re acting it’s clear that someone wrote an article about what I wrote.” Sometimes Aberforth was a little silly.

“That’s true enough. But I don’t think you’ll like what you’re called in here.” Aberforth’s eyes were hard, and quickly moved over the text. “Here, that’s a really good one: **fearmonger**, they call you. And here, that’s another good one: **lunatic**! Oh, even better: a **raving lunatic**! I think you might want to go back to the hospital!”

With widening eyes, Albus waved his hand and ripped the newspaper out of his brother’s hands with a silent, wandless summoning charm.

That couldn’t be. That sounded like Rita Skeeter was once again trying to systematically destroy his reputation.

Blue eyes quickly scanned the article and came to the conclusion that this was an attempt to slander his name. A good attempt, by all that he could see.

Was this really what he had written? Albus felt his heart beat faster, his breaths quickening.

Miss Skeeter had a tendency to exaggerate. Surely she had done so here?
Suddenly Albus wasn’t so sure anymore.

And wasn’t that one of the more frightening thoughts he had ever had?

“Take your potion, Albus,” Aberforth said, quiet but with authority. A potion phial was placed before Albus on the table with a soft sound.

Searching for his brother’s eyes, Albus looked up. The mocking and teasing were gone, leaving pity as the only thing Albus could see.

Feeling numb – the thought of truly losing his mind was paralysing – Albus reached for the small phial, removed the small stopper and swallowed the potion in one go.

Maybe he truly needed more help. Aberforth’s idea of going back to the hospital might be a good one.

oooOOooo

It had been a great day.

A truly wonderful day!

Full of delights, as more and more letters had come assuring him that the people didn’t believe a word of what Albus Dumbledore claimed of his plans and actions.

And he was having a lot of fun right now.

Dodging another of the boil curses thrown by Benjamin, Marvolo took quick stock of where the others were. The three of them were working together quite well.

He had set strict rules for their duels, which were inspired by the rules of the mock battles the children had fought during the Defence Club meetings, aimed at increasing their mobility and accuracy of aim, as well as their ability to use their surroundings.

A well-aimed transfiguration from Marvolo’s wand changed the upper layer of dust and grime to water, and another spell let that water freeze to ice. With a yelp Lucius landed on his ass, making an excellent target for Marvolo who had no trouble landing a spell on the man’s arm.

To do that he had to extend his arm out from behind the box he had used as cover, getting struck with a curse himself. Cursing in hissing Parseltongue Marvolo snatched his arm back, quickly moving to another part of the room, which was filled with conjured and transfigured objects, to get away from where the others thought he was hiding.

The boils were spreading quickly, swelling and aching. He was not allowed to cast the counter curse – even though he had specifically selected this curse as the only means of direct attack because it was easy to counter – so the swelling and the increasing pain started to impede his ability to hold his wand in his dominant hand.

Switching his wand to his other hand, Marvolo decided to go all out.

A quick spell transfigured the all present dust particles floating through the air into much bigger and a lot less dense balls, which he then sent with a wave of his painfully curled hand towards
where the others were trying to organise a concerted effort to subdue him with hurried whispers. The balls were too light to do any harm, but there were so many that they were an effective distraction.

It wasn’t easy casting with his off-hand, but nevertheless Marvolo was quick enough and much better with his aim now after countless mock duels to target each of the three wizards practising with him and managing to land a curse either on their wand arms or faces.

Pained hisses and the sound of heavy bodies colliding with walls, the floor, and the obstacles in the room, filled the sudden silence.

Marvolo stepped confidently out of the shadow between two stacks of boxes a small evil smirk on his lips.

Xerxes rolled over and to his feet. “And the school permits such exercises in that Defence Club your heir is running, my Lord? I have trouble believing that.”

Marvolo chuckled holding his arm out so one of the others could cast the counter to remove the now positively virulent-looking boils. “Harry lets them use soft balls spelled to stick to whatever they touch, or colour-changing spells. I can’t see how any professor might object to that version.”

Benjamin had cast the counter and had freed Marvolo from the nasty consequences of the curse they had been using instead of Harry’s more tame version of this same exercise. “It certainly changes things when the possible spells to use are limited by more than the ability of the healer at hand,” he observed before rising to his feet carefully, and as if he was in quite a bit of pain.

“Judging by the way Draco has improved since the summer, it’s an effective way of training reflexes,” Lucius said, freed of his own share of boils by Xerxes, and preparing to help the other wizard get rid of his own.

“I have to agree,” Xerxes nodded, otherwise holding still and pointing out the places where he had been hit earlier. “The stories being told between my acquaintances about what their children are writing from school mostly revolve around another unbelievable feat of magic our Lord’s heir has performed. The newest one claims he incapacitated between five and fifteen – the numbers vary – older students with silent spells.” Flexing his limbs to test if Lucius had gotten all the boils, Xerxes turned to look at Marvolo. “I remember that you always were the first to master any new spells silently, my Lord.”

Finishing the last counter for Benjamin with a flick of his wrist, Marvolo smirked over at his old friend. “I wouldn’t be surprised if my son had a talent for silent casting. Some aspects of our family magic lend themselves to a more instinctive understanding of the requirements to cast silently.” He grinned and waved for his duelling partners to follow him. “I haven’t heard that story yet. Severus could only inform me of what he found in the common room when he went to investigate. Is that story linked to the incident we spoke about yesterday?”

Marvolo would have bet a lot of Galleons on that, but he wanted to know what people were talking about. It was always beneficial to know how the truth was distorted in repeated re-tellings of an incident.

“It seems to be, my Lord,” Lucius finally confirmed.

“Theo wrote something similar. Said the older students had been resentful of the way your heir just jumped to the top of the hierarchy, challenged him under the influence of some liquid courage. Not that it did them any good.” Benjamin snorted, and chuckles from the others made clear they all
agreed. “Your son didn’t tell you, my Lord?”

Marvolo smiled and shook his head. “I think he might have anticipated a rather forceful reaction from me. And he isn’t the kind of teenager to run to an authority figure to intervene in something as trivial as a small scuffle in the common room.” He had said it with only a hint of the pride he felt that Harry wasn’t only at the top of Slytherin House because of the fact he was heir, but for his own capability to hold the place, based on both ability and the fact that he was willing to hold himself to the obligations coming with the position.

Of course Marvolo didn’t miss the small flicker of Lucius’ eyes at the not-so-subtle dig at Lucius’ son Draco’s tendency to invoke his father’s name at every opportunity.

They settled in Marvolo’s study with a few good cups of warm, strong tea, delicious small cherry-filled pastries, and some of the best chocolate money could buy. Exchanging some inconsequential small talk, they kept an eye on each other to make sure that their earlier activities hadn’t affected anyone in a dangerous way. It always had puzzled Marvolo in his youth how so many could try themselves in the Dark Arts, old rituals, and generally dangerous magics without taking the proper precautions. And he was sure he would have trouble finding someone who would not be surprised to hear him say that he approved of the restricted section in the Hogwarts library.

It was a sad truth that the needed precautions often were missing from the texts detailing the dangerous magic now mostly made illegal and banned. And it was a fact he still struggled with from time to time that his own youthful ignorance had led him to disregard the dangers of Horcruxes.

The simple truth was that not everyone was competent to use dark spells or dangerous rituals. But that was no reason to restrict them from being used at all. It just needed much better qualified teachers to make sure that those who learned, learned properly.

When the required time had passed, the others left one by one.

Xerxes was the last to leave.

“I’m happy for you, Marvolo.”

Marvolo was reasonably sure that Xerxes wasn’t congratulating him on his handling of Dumbledore’s latest – admittedly weak – attempt to drag his name through the mud. “What are you referring to?”

“The fact that your son finally agreed to let you use his nickname. The others might not see it, but the last time I saw you so purely happy… I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you as happy as you have been today every time you used his name.”

Marvolo hummed and then nodded slowly. “I hope adopting another child will add to that. But I’m aware that such a young boy will also cause more trouble than Harry has done so far.”

Xerxes only nodded and returned home, foregoing all the ceremony Marvolo had insisted on in the past. Marvolo himself walked back into his office to retrieve Nagini, before he returned home to Griffin House. He had paperwork to go through – building a fortune for the Slytherin family, separate from the money he was managing from the Potter assets was a lot of work – and a curious letter from Amelia Bones to answer. She had asked him for a meeting in Diagon Alley, not using the official stationery of the DMLE but her private one. It was all rather curious. But nothing he could get to the bottom of just now.
With a complaining Nagini in tow – why hadn’t she been allowed to play with them earlier? – Marvolo returned home and settled comfortably in an armchair in front of the fire to call Harry and ask him about his day. Getting an account of the reactions to the Prophet from his perspective would be a great ending to this day.

oooOOooo

With a weary sigh Severus sat down in his favoured chair in the staff room. It was time for the meeting Minerva had called. And Severus was pretty sure he knew was the topic would be.

“We need to decide where we stand in the matter of Albus.” Minerva stormed into the room, starting to speak the moment the door had closed behind her. “I fear the Board will try to remove him from the position of Headmaster on a more permanent basis.” She made a dramatic pause and sat down in the chair she always used, leaving Albus’ chair empty. “And as the Prophet has shown us this morning their chances are better than ever.”

And that started a discussion which probably would last for hours. Severus sat back in his chair watching the useless theories and plans be constructed and discarded one after the other. It would be a long evening.

oooOOooo

Wednesday, 31st of January 1996

The school looked like a great place for children. Ann was pretty sure she would have loved to go to school here, each morning travelling to a magical place, learning all about the ways she was different from the other children in her neighbourhood, and returning back home to her family in the evening.

Sadly, this school where children from families with the knowledge of magic and those from families where they were the first magical person, had only been founded recently. Ann followed the man who had been waiting by the floo to greet her and to observe her conversation with the young boy. He had introduced himself as Mr. London, and seemed to be a Squib. She wasn’t sure what made her think that, but as she hadn’t seen a wand on him so far, she wasn’t about to disregard her instincts.

But puzzling about this helped her keep her nerves. She had started to work at the Ministry only a few months back, and this was the first time she was on her own on an assignment. And that on a high profile case like this.

“Here we are, Miss Lucas. The boy should join us shortly,” Mr. London said, walking over to a chair standing next to a half shelf filled with colourful books and a few wooden toys – figurines of dragons, unicorns, and other creatures – to sit down.
Ann looked around herself. They now were in a small room with a low table in the middle, surrounded with low chairs, toys for small children in a box at the side, the chair now occupied by Mr. London, and different pictures on the walls. All in all it was rather cosy, but not like any room Ann could remember from her own schools.

She settled down and prepared to wait for a while, when the door she had just closed behind herself was opened again, and a small boy hurried in, almost skipping. He was followed by a young witch – at least the robes over her dress indicated as much – who smiled at Ann. “I’ll wait outside, just tell me when you’re finished so I can escort Marcus back to his class. I assume Mr. London has informed you that he will stay to represent Marcus in this?”

Mr. London hadn’t, but Ann had been informed that a representative of the school would stay during their conversation. It seemed a little odd to her, the man’s presence might influence Marcus to say something just to please the man, or make him afraid to say the truth. On the other hand young children could refuse to speak to a stranger if no known person was there with them all.

“I have been informed of the process, thank you.” Ann smiled and turned to the boy who already had taken a seat and was getting out the paper and coloured pencils to work on some picture.

Ann walked over to sit down herself and tried to determine how best to start this. “Hello, Marcus, do you know who I am?”

A bright red pencil was moved over the paper in big circles. “A witch from the Ministry. The others say if I say the right things, you’ll let Marvolo adopt me.”

Ann furrowed her brow. Who had said something so… wrong to the boy? If he said the right things? Before she could ask another question, Marcus continued to speak, not looking at her. “But Marvolo said, not to worry. We’re family, it might take some time, but we’ll be living together.”

Letting the comment about others and their claim he needed to say the right things go for the moment, Ann asked her next question. “So you would like to live with Lord Slytherin?”

At this Marcus looked up with a big grin on his face and nodded with enthusiasm. “Very much!”

“Have you met him often?”

“He comes to the school when he can. We have cleaned out –” A cold shiver ran down Ann’s spine the moment the boy suddenly hissed in the middle of his sentence.

Was that Parseltongue?

If it was, there clearly was no question that this boy belonged to the Slytherin family. And judging by the way he happily prattled on about what he had experienced with Lord Slytherin and the man’s familiar, and even the boy-who-lived, Marcus knew the family quite well already and looked forward to living with them.

Ann kept to her script, asking all the questions required of her, and noting down all the answers. After the boy hissed a few more times during that, seemingly always when he spoke about a snake that was living at the school in the science classroom, Ann was too happy to leave again.

Her report would be in favour of the adoption, but she was pretty certain she never would feel comfortable around people able to speak that language.

It was unnatural somehow.
Staunchly ignoring the hypocrisy of someone able to cast spells calling something else unnatural, Ann followed Mr. London back to the floo from where she gladly departed for the Ministry of Magic. She had forms to fill out and another visit to the school to prepare. There was a lot of work to do, now that the process for adoptions had been reworked by the Wizengamot.

ooOoo

Harry had gotten a letter from the Ministry in the morning post. The haughty owl delivering it had left without accepting the piece of bacon Harry had offered her. The letter had been written on low-quality parchment, like many official letters from the Ministry which weren’t from a department head. It had announced the arrival of a case worker from the Ministry in the adoption process of Marcus Everard, who wanted to ask Harry a few questions.

Another letter, this one from Madame Longbottom, had announced that she would stand in for his guardian during this interview, as Lord Slytherin couldn’t do it himself this time.

Both letters had said that they would meet with him after lessons, and that the meeting would take place in the Headmaster’s office.

When he had told this to his friends, all of them – Gryffindors as well as Slytherins – had voiced their concern over the fact that all the portraits of former headmasters and headmistresses would be able to listen in. The reasons they thought that bad had differed, but that wasn’t really anything new.

Harry had had to concede that it wasn’t really what he would prefer for such a meeting, but as he couldn’t really say anything that couldn’t be said in public anyway – he wanted them to be able to adopt Marcus into their family – the fact that he didn’t see any way to change the meeting place wasn’t really a problem. With that many witnesses, it might even be better, because no one could claim he had said things that he hadn’t.

At the moment Harry was on his way up to the circular office, hoping that someone would open the door for him, as he didn’t know what Professor McGonagall used as her password.

“There you are, Henry!” Madame Longbottom smiled at him. Harry noticed that she had left the hat with the stuffed vulture at home, opting for a less extravagant dark red pointed hat instead.

“I had wondered how I would get into the office,” Harry said, feeling relieved that at least that little problem had resolved itself.

“There’s no reason to be nervous. The questions will be easy, and there are no wrong answers. Stick to the truth and all will be well.” Madame Longbottom patted him on the shoulder in an attempt to calm him down, smiling.

While they took the last steps to the gargoyle, Harry thought to himself that there were a lot of wrong answers he could give. He needed to be careful, really careful. One wrong step, pretending too hard, or letting something slip that shouldn’t be known could ruin so much more than their chance to adopt Marcus and give him a good home.

On top of the revolving stairs, just before Madame Longbottom could knock to announce their presence, Harry took a deep breath and started to clear his mind. The border between Marvolo and the Dark Lord was clear enough. If he kept his wits about him, he should be able to tell only those
things belonging to Marvolo, the man who had worked hard to be a good father. 

“Ah, there you are, Mr. Slytherin, Augusta. Come in and sit down.” Professor McGonagall greeted them briskly from behind the desk. Harry realised that she didn’t seem to happy, and remembered that she was close to Dumbledore and had fought against Voldemort before that night. 

The room hadn’t changed much since Harry had been here last. There were three chairs in the room before the desk where normally only two stood, facing the desk, but they fit perfectly into the eccentric style Headmaster Dumbledore favoured. The number of people present was another difference. There was an Auror present – recognizable because of the robes – and the woman who had also been there at his own adoption, then there were Professor McGonagall, Madame Longbottom, and Harry himself. 

It was rather crowded in here. 

“Hello, Harry, please have a seat. Not sure if you remember me. I’m Amanda Wisby, and I’m here to ask you a few questions.” She smiled in a friendly manner, and Harry remembered the cluttered office he had seen the day he had been adopted. If he could have, he would have sent to himself a message that day that everything would work out all right. On the other hand, if someone had handed him a piece of parchment claiming just that on his way up to the office of Mrs. Wisby, he would probably have felt more apprehension. 

“It’s nice to see you again, Mrs. Wisby,” Harry returned the greeting, and sat down, ignoring the Auror, following the lead of the others on that one. With great concentration, Harry managed not to fidget or blurt out a question of his own. 

Hopefully this wouldn’t take long. 

“I guess you’re aware that your father has applied to adopt another child?” Mrs. Wisby had sat down in another chair directly opposite Harry’s, a smile on her face and writing implements in her hand. 

Harry nodded, trying for a polite, interested, but calm expression. “I was there when we learned that he’s a Parselmouth just like us. So, yes, I know.” 

The auror shifted from one foot to the other, radiating unease, but Harry tried his best to ignore the man. 

“And what do you think of adding a young boy to your young family?” Her question sounded a little obvious. But maybe that was intentional. Why should she try to trick him, anyway? 

“I’ve been the one to bring it up. I’m not sure, but I guess father was a little surprised. He thought for a long time that he was the last of Slytherin’s line. The possibility that the talent might go dormant in Squib lines for several generations hadn’t really been among the things he had considered.” 

“You haven’t been Lord Slytherin’s son for all that long. How do you feel about the situation?” Mrs. Wisby wanted to know, making Harry wish he could roll his eyes. The group of questions if Harry was happy with the prospect of a younger brother seemed to be finished. Dismissing his wonder over the number of possible questions she would ask if he had stayed vague with his answers, Harry deliberately waited a moment, pretending to think hard. “It wasn’t easy at first. But I think we’ve both learned a lot, and now it’s really good.” And it was. It wasn’t perfect, but expecting perfection was a sure way to never being happy. And Harry was determined to find happiness in his life.
“I’m sure it is.” Mrs. Wisby smiled kindly. “But I’m sure there have been reasons for you to disagree with him. I’ve never heard of a teenager always happy with the decisions of their parents.”

That almost certainly was a trick question. Albeit one easy to spot. If he claimed that there never had been any disagreement, it would look suspicious, as if he were trying to hide something. “Not many. At first I wasn’t happy that he insisted I carry an emergency portkey with a location charm on it all times. I even once took it off and left it behind somewhere in the garden. But after the Dementors attacked, I saw the value of having a way to escape on hand. I wasn’t happy that he made me take an adult along on Hogsmeade weekends while the Death Eaters who escaped from Azkaban were on the run...” Harry trailed off, shrugging. Maybe if he hadn’t known danger so well first-hand, and hadn't been a little happy to have someone actually care, he would have been inclined to go against those rules. But he did know danger intimately, and enjoyed being cared for despite himself.

“So he's never had reason to punish you?” Mrs. Wisby still smiled with unparalleled kindness, and Harry started to suspect that it might be a mask after all. But he could be wrong. Seeing plots where there were none was a real danger.

“When I left the portkey behind, he made me answer a kind of quiz.” Harry chuckled, remembering the outlandish questions and answer possibilities that had been in that quiz. "One with several possible answers given per question. It was fun in a way.” While Harry thought back, searching for more situations in which he had been punished, it was silent in the room, only the fire making any sound. “I guess that was the only time,” Harry finally said, astonished. Had it really been just that one time? “Maybe… he always explains why something is the way it is, or why I can’t do something… The Dursleys never did.” Harry shrugged again. “I guess it helps that he’s so different, and knows a bit about how it is, growing up without parents.”

Harry would have liked to say more, really praise what Marvolo had done that Dumbledore never did, or the Dursleys, or any other adult in the past. But he knew he couldn’t do that and hope to keep the problems with his aunt and uncle from the public.

Marvolo's exposing his past had been a good move politically. Harry wasn’t in need of that kind of publicity. So he preferred not to expose his past.

Mrs. Wisby asked more questions, all of them clearly intended to get a feeling for Marvolo’s competence as a parent. What they ate for meals. Who prepared them. And other things like that.

Harry told about Flimm, who was handling all the housework and was really good with preparing food. The fact that Marvolo made sure that Harry saw a Healer, and how they had studied together during the summer.

It was relatively easy to gloss over things like the fact that the healer had broken several of Harry’s bones, or leave out how Marvolo had made an unbreakable vow not to harm or kill Harry. Instead he concentrated on small friendly, but largely insignificant, anecdotes. Buying clothes, visiting the Potter mill, making Harry drop Divination.

At the end of it all, he felt drained and quickly walked towards the dungeons once he had said his farewells to Neville’s gran and the Ministry workers. Not bothering to remember the current password to the common room, Harry hissed the simple Parseltongue password at the door and stepped in.

Most of the others seemed to be still up eating dinner, but Theo got up from one of the love seats by the fireplace the moment he spotted Harry. “How did it go?”
Harry smiled, rubbing his hand over his eyes. “I think it went well. Mrs. Wisby was there to ask
the questions. Not sure why there was an auror present as well. But she clearly is in favour
of simply placing kids into families with the same kind of magical talent.” Shrugging again – he was
doing that rather often today – Harry let himself fall into the armchair he used most of the time,
facing towards his friend. “Maybe the Auror was supposed to ask questions as well, but it looked
as if he hadn’t been prepared to do so. Anyway, Madame Longbottom had no reason to interfere,
and the portraits kept silent. But they seem to pretend to sleep most of the time anyway.”

Theo smiled. “Can you imagine that I haven’t been up to the Headmaster’s office even once so far?
What do I need to do to get invited up there? Smuggle a dangerous beast into the school and rescue
a few first-years?”

“Don’t be silly,” Harry chided. “It’s a circular office with the walls filled with portraits of stuffy,
old, sleeping people. Hardly worth the trouble. Believe me.”

Theo nodded with a clearly exaggerated solemn expression. “I’ll have to take your word for it.” For
a moment they sat in silence, slumped down into their respective seats. “What do you think, go to
the kitchens for some dinner?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Harry agreed and stood from his place. If he skipped dinner, he wouldn’t
sleep well. His talk with Marvolo and Sirius could wait until later.

Talking about their current Herbology assignment, Theo and Harry made their way to the kitchens,
where they were served delicious food by the eager-to-please elves.

oooOoooo

A sleeping Nagini weighing down his legs, Marvolo sat on his bed in his bedroom at Griffin
House, casting a new log into the fire – using a levitation charm of course – so the room would
stay warm until morning. Nagini did like the warmth, and Marvolo certainly had no objections to
staying warm during the night. If he got cold in his sleep, he was likely to have nightmares. He
hadn’t asked Mrs. Goyle, but suspected that it was linked to the many nights he had spent shivering
in the cold of his room at Wool’s.

But right now he felt warm and content. His familiar was curled up on top of him and most of his
bed, he had eaten a good dinner, and he had a book close at hand that he would read before going
to sleep, after he had spoken with his son.

Marvolo hissed to the mirror in his hand, settling a little deeper into the cushions stacked behind
his back.

The mirror flickered and the reflective surface was replaced with the face of a tired Harry. The boy
yawned and mumbled. “Oh, hello, Father. How late is it?”

“Not all that late. Did I wake you?” Was Harry getting a cold? Why would he sleep so early? The
clearly more-tangled-than-usual state of that impossible hair indicated that Harry really had already
been asleep.

Harry nodded. “Was a hard day.” He yawned again, placing his hand over his wide-open mouth
just in time not to grant Marvolo a straight look down his gullet. “The visit from Mrs. Wisby on top
of all the homework was a bit much today.”
Marvolo nodded. His own memories of OWL year told basically the same story. Much too much homework, tests and quizzes, lots of revision, and a flourishing black market for stimulating and relaxing substances. Or what people tried to pass off for them, anyway. “How did it go?”

Harry moved – probably sitting up – and rubbed a hand over his hair, musing it even more. “I think it went well. Mrs. Wisby clearly wants the adoption to go through. She was really happy that you were adopting me back in the summer, wasn’t she? And the Auror who was with her, didn’t say a word.” The boy shrugged, his green eyes unfocused in his clear exhaustion.

Marvolo hummed. “As far as I heard, the Auror had to jump in on rather short notice, because the one who was assigned the task had been called to another urgent task.” He wasn’t all that sure it had been the best idea, but as the process was so new, it was likely that no one would question the missing questions of the Auror.

“Did you have a hand in that?” Harry suddenly seemed a lot more alert, eyes narrowed a little in suspicion.

Shaking his head, and laughing in approval, Marvolo denied that accusation. “No. I didn’t order any of that. But there was a case of fraud in Diagon Alley today. Someone tried to pass off horse dung as dragon dung to an apothecary. It looked as if a duel would break out. Not something anyone should risk in the middle of an apothecary, believe me. One of mine saw the opportunity, and asked for the Auror assigned to come question you as a partner for that situation. As they usually work together, someone else needed to take over the assignment at Hogwarts with you today.” Marvolo shrugged. “I think it was a good idea to use the opportunity.”

Now Harry hummed, and then shrugged. “I guess it would have taken longer if the Auror had asked question of his own. So there’s that. I have no idea how I will survive all the homework.”

Accepting the change in topic, Marvolo asked for the details of Harry’s lessons and where he had trouble. They kept the call short, as Harry really was rather tired and needed to sleep, and Marvolo was looking forward to reading in the comfort of his bed. The book he had found was a collection of wizarding fairy tales from India, only English translations, but interesting nonetheless.

Thursday, 1st of February 1996

Someone had be-spelled a harp to play soft music in the background. Only the fact that most students were not really awake just yet made it possible to hear it with so many people present.

Nawel was cutting up a few apples to go with her poached egg and bread roll, her sister clutching a cup of black coffee in her hands, sitting next to her, when the letters came in. Some of the students who had been to Hogwarts last year – well, the last school year at least – had told those that had stayed in France in whispers of horror that the owls carrying the post actually had access to the hall where everyone was eating. Bringing in water when it was raining, leaving feathers in the food, and generally tracking dirt on to the tables during breakfast.

Nawel was really happy that the whole thing with letters was organised differently here. Owls would leave their burdens in a room designed for that purpose and the elves would deliver the post.
after they had checked it for dangers such as curses or poison. Not that there had been a reason that
the security had been necessary in the recent past. But that was the way it was done here.

Besides a few packets – sweets and the like from parents and other relatives – magazines, and
newspapers, the letters were distributed. While the girls from their dorm, sitting at the same table,
quickly bent over a magazine for young witches, Nawel turned the letter that had been placed
between her and her sister in her hands so she could read the address.

She hadn’t seen the handwriting before, but the fact that it wasn’t one she recognized let her hope
that it could be a letter from their father.

“Enora! Wake up! We have a letter!” Nawel poked her sister with a finger until she turned with a
right glower to glare at her sister. If Enora had been a cat, her fur would have been standing on end,
her fangs would be bared, and a hiss would surely disrupt the lovely harp music.

“Don’t be that way! I think it’s from... Sirius.” Nawel managed just in time to switch to using their
probable father’s given name. They had agreed to not talk about their possible father until they
knew for sure. Some of their classmates were terrible gossips and it could get annoying pretty fast
if they got hold of that chance, that possibility in their lives.

“A letter?” Enora still wasn’t awake and wouldn’t be until she had finished her coffee.

“Yes, a letter.” Nawel rolled her eyes, and shook her head at her sister. Taking an unused knife
from the table, she broke the seal and opened the letter. The letter was pretty long, at least two
pages, if they weren’t used on both sides. And the letter was written in English as a quick, first
look confirmed.

Lucky for them their mother had insisted that they learn English as a foreign language spoken in
many parts of the world, additionally to the Latin and ancient Greek that was offered at
Beauxbatons, and taken by most students for at least a few years.

While the level of noise around them slowly rose with the increased alertness of the students,
Nawel held the letter reading, while her sister rested her chin on her shoulder, reading the letter at
the same time.

Dear Enora Libra and Nawel Lyra,

I hope you’ll take the time to read my letter. As I never learned any French, and translation spells
tend to erase the finer details of the written word, not that I would claim to have much talent with
expressing myself in any clear way, I have decided to write in English, hoping that you’ll be able to
read it, either because you’re more clever than me and actually know more than one language, or
are able to find a much better translation spell, or even someone to translate this for you.

Your mother and I have spoken, and she gave me permission to write to you. If you would like to
answer me, either in a letter together or in two separate ones, I would be really happy. Knowing
that I have been a father all those years, unintentionally ignoring your existence weighs heavily on
my mind.

I know I can’t expect you to give me a chance, but I still hope that I will get one.

As I’m not sure what to write you, and don’t want to bore you to death with some old stories,
asked my godson for advice. Before I follow that advice, I would like to ask which name the both of you prefer to be called. The fact that your mother unknowingly continued with an old family tradition by naming you after constellations was a surprise. Maybe she did so because she remembered my name? I guess I’ll have to ask her about that.

You know that she’s scary, don’t you?

Anyway.

Before I descend even more into rambling, let me tell you a bit about how I’m trying to become a respectable adult now that I’m out of prison.

And he proceeded to do just that. His penmanship, terrible in places, filled all the pages without leaving much room, detailing his current actions to bring order back into the estate he had inherited, alluding to some events in the past, he asked them to inquire about anything they truly wanted to know. He also mentioned his godson a few times, as well as other people he would like them to meet – cousins of his, mostly – and places he wanted to show them.

Nawel felt he was almost trying too hard. But even thinking about what she would want to write in an answering letter, she felt a nervousness rising that might make her write an equally rambling letter in return.

“Think he sent that without reading it again because he feared to lose the nerve?” Enora asked, all sleepiness gone from her voice.

“Maybe,” Nawel answered distractedly, turning the last page to reveal the last sentences of the letter from their father.

As I now have managed to be a self-centred git for too many pages, I would like to ask you to write to me, tell me what your favourite subjects are. Do you like Quidditch? What do you want to know about me? Your mother said we could meet in your spring holidays, and I think one property belonging to our family might be a great meeting place. It’s a small home near the place where the Seine meets the Channel. You both wouldn’t need to travel far to get there, and we could all get to know each other better.

In the hope that you’ll grant me the favour of a chance to get to know you

your father,

Lord Sirius Orion Black

That sounded as if Sirius Black truly wished to get to know them.

“We need to start eating, Nawel, or we’ll starve till lunchtime. Let’s read the letter again in the evening.”

Nawel reluctantly nodded, and placed the letter back in its envelope. She felt hopeful. If the man
had been a stuffy Lord, he would have made sure to send a composed, polite, and interested-
sounding letter. Not this unplanned, rambling letter more fitting for a boy their age.

She planned to write a letter back that was at least that long.

Chapter End Notes

This concludes the month of January. I fear writing a chapter stretching more than a few days is not my strengths :D

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Next chapter planned for 14th of September 2018

last edited 31st of August 2018
Because I have something to write that has a set deadline, I'll have to postpone the next chapter after this (which is number 84) for longer than two weeks. The next planned update for this story is the 19th of October 2018. This hopefully will free my mind so I can concentrate fully on the other project. If I get that one done quicker, I'll return to writing chapter 84 and may be publishing that sooner, returning to usual update schedule after that.

Please don't be disappointed ;) and now have fun with the current chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thursday, 1st of February 1996

"Father said that OWL year is hard, but I never thought it would be this hard!" Daphne slumped down into her seat, dropping her quill to her parchment, a scowl of frustration on her face.

The whole group of fifth-year Slytherins was sitting around one of the bigger tables in the common room, working on various homework assignments or revision. Something, Harry had noticed, they did more and more. Between classes, meals, the Defence Club, and Quidditch training, there wasn't much else but studying.

Just yesterday evening Marvolo had laughed when Harry had complained over the workload. But then he had commiserated because he himself was preparing to take several OWLs and the transfiguration NEWT during the testing period in late spring. Dumbledore's move to get Marvolo's records wiped had proven to be an annoyance.

"I think we all can use a break!" Draco declared, setting his own quill down before capping his inkwell. Murmured agreement, the rustling of parchment rolling up, the sound of books being closed, and a few relieved groans echoed around the table.

Harry slid a piece of parchment he had used to practice drawing runes into the herbology text he had been reading, closed the book, and slid back onto the loveseat until he could rest his head on the backrest, rubbing his nose. All this studying was going to kill him. Harry idly wondered how bad it had to be for Ron staying around Hermione all the time.

"Do any of you have plans on whom to take on the next Hogsmeade weekend?" Pansy wanted to know, bringing back up one of her favourite topics of the last weeks. Theo rolled his eyes behind Pansy's back and Harry stifled the giggle that wanted to break loose. Especially the boys in their group were unhappy about Pansy's persistence with the topic.

"I'm only sure that Hermione and that Weasley boy won't go together." Theo remarked, neatly sidestepping the question Pansy had asked in many variations by now. The public rejection of Ron's question by Hermione had been the talk of the school for a few days. A good reason to ask such a question in a more private setting.

Harry himself hadn't yet managed to ask Luna if she wanted to go with him. It truly wasn't an easy
task to find the time and the right words to ask.

"Do you remember the farce that oblivious idiot Lockhart made of Valentine's day? Those dwarves?" one sixth-year who had been walking by suddenly asked into the room, drawing the attention of almost everyone present.

"Dwarves?" little Tabitha Smith asked, abandoning her game of chess to turn in her place on one of the rugs in front of a fireplace.

Septimus Yaxley laughed, turning carefully so as not to disturb his boyfriend, who was resting with his head in Septimus' lap, reading in *Quidditch through the Ages*. "He had the whole castle decorated with hearts in different shades of pink. And he had paid a bunch of dwarves to dress up as cupids, and carry singing messages to students and teachers alike."

Harry wondered which professor had received one of those singing valentines – excluding Lockhart of course – and didn't notice the slight smirk on Draco's face as he started to add his own little titbit of information for the younger students.

"I remember that there were quite a few horrible examples among the valentines. A few people would have been better severed if they hadn't written their messages themselves." The moment Draco turned to catch Harry's eye the green-eyed teen felt himself flush. Please no! "Did you ever learn who compared the colour of your eyes to that of a pickled toad?"

Harry groaned and wished he could have just vanished under the table or his cloak. "Don't be such a prat!" Draco sniggered. "I didn't know any professors beside that blond fraud got any valentines."

"I heard that Professor Trelawney got a few. But I think that was on a dare," Millicent answered Harry's not-really-asked question, starting a recounting of different slightly horrifying retellings of dwarves barging into classrooms, waylaying people in the halls – in one case sitting on the person they had a message for – and singing terrible poetry in off key voices.

It was a much-needed and much-appreciated break in the ongoing study frenzy.

oooOOooo

It was the second time that Lucius was on his way to the Hogshead. Or rather the second time he went there after he had graduated from Hogwarts. It had been a bit of a game among the students of his time to go there and order some hard spirits. To this day he wasn't sure if Aberforth Dumbledore – not really noticeably younger back then – had given them stuff because he didn't really care or because he deliberately tried to get them in trouble.

Anyway. Since he had been old enough to be beyond such silly games he hadn't purposefully sought out the lacklustre establishment. That is, until the Board had sent him as their owl to deliver the warning to Albus Dumbledore.

Now the time was up, and they hadn't received a letter of resignation of the former Headmaster of Hogwarts.

And so it was that Lucius Malfoy, Lord and Head of House of his family, was walking through the cold February weather, crushing old snow under his boot's heels, once again playing owl.

Not that he really minded this duty all that much.

Getting to fire the old meddler was something he had tried more than once in the past. But this time his charges were so much better, he was certain that there was nothing the old man could do to
dodge this spell as he had dodged so many others.

Once again the owner of the pub greeted him and gruffly led him into the private rooms. "Albus, a visitor for you."

Lucius stepped in, steeling his mental shields and reminding himself not to meet the eyes of the old man. The tendency of a Legilimens to take a peek was dangerous, especially if the one in question was of questionable sanity. "Good day, Mr. Dumbledore," Lucius greeted the old man sitting in an armchair, a book in his lap. It felt good to deny the wizard any kind of title. He waited a moment for a reply, but he wasn't really sure the old man had heard him until he closed his book and raised his head.

The odd thought that the once so powerful wizard seemed incredibly old struck Lucius where he stood in the doorway to the modest living room. Well, modest if he was generous.

"I had wondered when one of you would show up."

Getting the official parchment out of the expanded pocket of his warm fur-lined winter cloak, Lucius prepared for his little speech. "Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, as a representative of the Board of Governors for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, I, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, am here to inform you that you are permanently removed from the position of Headmaster. This decision was made after due consideration based on the declining health and lack of judgement on part of the former Headmaster observed in the last months."

Lucius spoke with the practiced ease he always displayed on such occasions – he practiced such speeches before he had to give them – but felt slightly disappointed by the fact that the old man wasn't reacting as Lucius had thought he would.

"Have you any counter-arguments to make?"

The long white beard moved slightly with the shaking of the old wizard's head. "No, that's quite all right, Lucius, my boy."

Only long practice in not showing his thoughts to those watching kept Lucius from gasping at that calmly presented proclamation. "I'm not yet sure where I stepped away from my path. Or when. But these last days have shown me that I might be in more need of help than I would have thought when you last were here." A wave from the old hand sent a letter over to Lucius, where it hovered effortlessly. "Am I right to assume that you'll go to the school after your visit here?"

Lucius gave a terse nod. This wasn't going even remotely like he had envisioned it. "Then might I impose on your time by asking you to take a letter to Minerva? She'll be offered the position of Headmistress, won't she?"

Lucius nodded again, getting his wand out of his cane, casting a series of strong detection charms at the letter. Only when each of them had come up clean, not detecting any potions, mundane poisons, curses, or charms on it, did he take it with his gloved hand. "She'll be offered the position." Lucius wasn't really happy with that, but his old Transfiguration professor had always been a stern and capable witch.

The sad, sage smile was almost too much for Lucius to tolerate. "Thank you for making the effort to deliver the letter in person, my boy. All the best for you and your family, should we not meet again."

Some time later, a confused Lucius strode through the early evening up towards the gates of Hogwarts. That had been a strange visit. He had expected a lot more resistance, but maybe he
should be happy that the worst scenarios that had been brought up hadn't come to pass. Duelling the wizard who had defeated Grindelwald on his own – as weakened as he might have been – wasn't really something he had wished to do this day.

Now to see if Minerva McGonagall would be willing to take over the position of Headmistress of Hogwarts. If she declined, a long discussion would follow. Too many candidates had been offered up for the Board to be able to decide on one single candidate anytime soon.

oooOOooo

Saturday, 3th of February 1996

After another letter, Amelia Bones and Marvolo had arranged a date and place to meet. And so here he was in a set of his best casual robes – wool with subtle embroidery along the edges – over a suit from equally expensive material but of a muggle style, walking down Diagon Alley towards the small high-end restaurant they had agreed upon.

Marvolo had tried to get a feeling for why the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement wanted to meet with him. And why she had used her private stationary and not the official one. But it hadn't worked. She simply had ignored the subtle hints he had added throughout the letter in an attempt to get more information.

And because of that fact, Marvolo felt a little apprehensive about the meeting that was to be happening in a few moments. The question why she wanted to meet with him – here – just wouldn't let him rest.

All the cues given – the stationary, the meeting place – pointed to a private reason for the meeting, but for the love of the gods Marvolo had no idea why Amelia Bones would want to meet with him privately. Different reasons had come up in his thoughts running in circles, whenever he hadn't been distracted by the endless administrative tasks required to pursue his political goals, training, research, or talks with his son. The most plausible of the lot was that maybe she was aiming to get a marriage contract set up between her niece – a girl in Hufflepuff and Harry's year as far as he knew – and Harry.

But despite it being the most plausible idea, it didn't really feel right either. Why should Madame Bones, who had lost family to the Death Eaters, want to tie her niece to the heir of Slytherin? It just seemed so unlikely.

When Marvolo stepped into the restaurant, he didn't need to give his name, or ask for Madame Bones. The moment the owner – or at least the witch currently minding the entrance – spotted him, he was greeted with a warm smile. "Lord Slytherin! Welcome to the Floating Candle. Madame Bones is already here and waiting. If you would follow me, please."

And so Marvolo did, getting an impression of the food served here when they walked past the alcoves set into the walls where he could smell what had been served at the respective tables. From the fragrant curries inspired by Indian dishes to more classically English dishes, a range of options was being offered.

Speculations over the possibility of getting a chocolate-heavy desert vanished from Marvolo's mind the moment he followed the witch in her dark blue, silken robes into an alcove where Madame Bones was waiting for him, idly browsing the menu.

"I'll be back to get your orders in a moment." And with a small courtesy, the witch was gone. It seemed she had perfected the move, maybe taking inspiration from a house elf.
"Madame Bones," Marvolo greeted with a bow in the woman's direction, feeling a little awkward. Another instance he had to confront feelings he wasn't used to. Normally he knew what he wanted out of a meeting, or knew a probable reason that another wanted to meet him. Going into a meeting with someone as influential as this woman practically blind wasn't something he did enjoy.

At all.

In the past he always had declined meetings where he either didn't know what he wanted, or what the other wanted. But this time something was different. A mix of his wish to be part of society, his need to appear agreeable, some weird sense of obligation he couldn't place, and simply his curiosity had compelled him to agree to the meeting.

"Lord Slytherin, please take a seat." Madame Bones waved towards the richly upholstered armchair across the table from her. "I can recommend the roast, but the curry is really good as well."

Marvolo sat down in the armchair, smoothing down his robes so they wouldn't impede his movement, and using the opportunity to take in Madame Bones. She had selected casual clothes, going for good quality and a more modern style, just as Marvolo had. Her posture belied a little tension, but more of the kind indicating nerves and not the tension usually hinting at someone being ready to fight at a moments notice.

"Is the chef known to make good recommendations? I might just leave the fate of my meal in his hands." Marvolo picked up the topic of meal selection that Madame Bones had selected as their starting point. An obvious choice for a meeting held in a restaurant, which didn't make it any easier for Marvolo to get a feel for what would be the real topic of this meeting.

"I usually take the roast with vegetables matching the season when I'm here. So I sadly have to say that I don't know if the recommendations from the kitchen are usually well received by the guests." Madame Bones' smile was easy, polite, and maybe a tad warmer than her usual professional smile.

"Well, maybe I'll take a risk and ask for a recommendation then," Marvolo decided. Not having to search the menu would give him more time to analyse his companion's behaviour. "Do you come here often?"

"Not really, no. From time to time, but there isn't a reason to eat out all that often."

Sighing in his head, Marvolo realised that Madame Bones, for all that she hadn't been a Slytherin during school, wasn't going to let him simmer over a small flame. In an attempt to fill the time until she would tell him why she had wanted to meet with him with something more interesting than the usual stock of small talk – the weather, the food, and Quidditch results – Marvolo seized their one mostly neutral common ground. "How does your niece like the current professor for Defence Against the Dark Arts?"

"Susan wrote that she fears Professor Slinkhard has a much too theory-centred lesson plan. Especially in her OWL year she would love to practice more. But judging by what she wrote, Professor Slinkhard is an improvement over Dolores Umbridge." Something dark entered the eyes of the witch across from Marvolo.

He ignored it even as he was fascinated and wanted to see if he might be able to fan that darkness into something more, instead he nodded knowingly. "Harry has voiced many of the same concerns, and the same approval. I think his exact words were: At least he lets us ask questions."

It was easy to fill the time with talk about their own experiences with their OWLs and the
respective reports they had received from the children in their care about the Defence classes since they had come to Hogwarts, and especially this year. Marvolo felt as if he was dancing at the edge of a volcano. There were some topics he needed the discussion to stay away from, but he couldn't be obvious about it.

It was fun, if a little frustrating, because he really wanted to know what Madame Bones wanted to talk about.

When their food and wines had been brought to their table – levitated by a young wizard – Madame Bones fixed Marvolo with her gaze. "Do you have any objections to raising some privacy charms?"

"None," Marvolo said, picking up his glass of red wine, swirling it around to get a whiff of the scent. It seemed the verbal fencing and evasion of dangerous topics was over.

She got her wand out and set up a flurry of different privacy spells – including one to prevent people from reading their lips – with efficient wand movements speaking of extensive practice. Marvolo sat back, watched her spellwork looking for possible weaknesses, and sipped his wine, which truly was excellent and would work quite well with his lamb roast and the side dish of various root vegetables baked in a sauce of cream and excellent spices. The fragrant smells were mouth-watering.

Once Madame Bones was finished with her casting, she put her wand away and picked up her knife and fork to take the first bite of her curry with rice. "I know that I was rather evasive regarding the reason I wanted to talk with you, Lord Slytherin." She began to talk, rolling her eyes and smirking when Marvolo hummed in confirmation of her admission. She truly had made him wait.

She took another bite and after she had chewed – certainly longer than was necessary, it seemed she was trying to kill him – and swallowed her bite, she took a fortifying breath.

What could be so nerve-wracking that she had true trouble talking to him about it?

"During the Yule season I happened to be nearby when you, Lord Slytherin, were speaking to a few of your… acquaintances. Maybe I should have moved on, or made my presence known, but I stopped to listen."

Marvolo's mind was racing. Had he been careless enough to have talked about delicate matters where others could have heard? Where Madame Bones had listened in?

But no.

That made no sense.

If she had heard him talk about something truly incriminating, they wouldn't have met here. In private. She would have had him arrested. Weeks ago.

Despite the fact that Marvolo had concluded that whatever she had overheard, it hadn't been related to any of his less legal activities, Marvolo's heart was racing with the adrenaline of fear of discovery. He hadn't felt this way since the first few times he had sneaked a book in the restricted section of the Hogwarts library that he hadn't had explicit permission to read.

It was exhilarating!

"That's the way I learned that you think of yourself as asexual and feel the pressure of society to see a young wizard married and with a few children." She stubbornly was holding his gaze, not looking away but blushing in embarrassment.
Marvolo blinked in shock. That was not what he had thought might happen. This possible line of
conversation hadn't even crossed his mind once. Madame Bones offering him a position as Auror
had been among the ideas his mind had supplied, but his lack of interest in sexual acts never had
come to mind. Maybe he needed to remember himself how much importance the different kinds of
human relationships he had always regarded as a weakness had to others.

Before Marvolo could think on his obvious obliviousness in regards to human attachments and
their importance in the eyes of others, Madame Bones got even more uneasy and ploughed on with
her confession. "I know that it would have been proper to walk on, or make my presence known.
But I couldn't make myself miss the opportunity to listen in on what looked like it was a private
conversation… I want to apologize that I…"

Marvolo held up one hand to stop her and the unnecessary apology. "Please, Madame Bones. There
is no need to apologise. Luckily I no longer suffer under curse-induced paranoia, but I was a
Slytherin in school. And am Lord Slytherin now. If I had felt the need to keep this private and a
secret I would have set up wards. Or, more likely, never spoken at such an event where others
might be near enough to overhear."

She had asked him to meet her because she wanted to confess that she had eavesdropped on one of
his more private conversations?

That didn't make much more sense than any other ideas either.

Her smile was wry. "Maybe I don't need to apologise then, but that's not the main reason I asked
for a personal meeting away from the curious eyes of the Ministry." Their food stood before them
largely ignored, but Marvolo didn't care, the conversation was much more entertaining than the
delicious smelling food. "I also wanted to offer you my support. Our society doesn't really
acknowledge the existence of those not interested in… well, sex." Marvolo felt a small smirk tug at
his mouth over the blunt nature of the witch even as he had trouble guessing what exactly she was
offering.

"I know how hard a time most have envisioning even the possibility of someone not interested in
any sexual acts. I guess it's such an integral part of most people's lives that it's easier to accept that
the interest might be aimed at someone other than they would feel attracted to than missing
altogether." She took a deep breath and seemed to gather herself. "What I'm trying to tell you, Lord
Slytherin, was that it took a while before people accepted I wasn't going to marry. But even now
the rumours say that I'm just am more interested in my career than in a family, or that my one true
love was killed in the war."

Tilting his head to the side, Marvolo couldn't resist asking, "And who are they claiming was your
one true love?" It was daring, considering that Death Eaters had killed people of the Bones family,
but he was pretending only too gladly pretend to forget the past, and his own part in it.

"The names vary." Madame Bones waved the question away, literally, and gave him a searching
look. "I thought about your tentative idea of finding someone for a marriage of convenience. Are
you still following that plan?"

Taking a sip from his wine, Marvolo picked up his utensils, they should eat and not just talk.
Cutting into his roast he thought about her question. "I have not discarded the plan yet. But
considering that I think our inclination isn't all that common and I can't see myself being happy
with just anyone… I think it unlikely that I will find someone willing to marry me and be happy.
Added on top of that is the fact I'm older in experience than in looks, but in some ways considered
younger than I am, father to a teenager and soon a child barely of school age. Managing everything
is demanding enough. Others tell me a relationship is hard work if one wants it to work well."
Marvolo shrugged. "I'm not sure I have the energy left to invest in a relationship I can do without."

Conceding his point with a nod, Madame Bones picked up her knife and fork as well. "Nonetheless, my offer stands. If you need someone to talk to who has had some of the same experiences, I'm willing to lend my ear and give advice as well as I can."

The rest of their meal was once again spend in friendly banter and superficial conversations. Topics starting with the newest development of wand holster fashion – some versions were purely aesthetic and made drawing a wand even harder than keeping it in a simple pocket would be – to the differences in Hogwarts' curriculum of the present compared to both Madame Bones' and Marvolo's times, and not stopping as the Auror training program was brought up.

They took the wards down once they had finished their main course, and then ordered coffee and a dessert apiece.

Marvolo still was confused over why exactly Madame Bones had felt the need to offer him support by the time they parted ways and he returned home. Maybe Harry would be able to shed some light on this strange evening.

With the resolve in mind to ask his son if he could figure it out, Marvolo apparated back home.

If nothing else, this evening had managed to give him a few new things to ponder while distracting him effectively from his usual worries, currently mostly centred around the adoption and the slow progress on that front, as well as his stagnating search for a way to bind a soul piece to another container once he had removed it from the one he had originally stored it in.

Soon there would be another day suited to powerful rituals, and until then he had to have finished the next iteration of the ritual.

Deep in thought, Marvolo walked up the stairs, listening distractedly to Nagini prattling on about the rat she had hunted through the whole house.

ooOoo

On her way home Amelia thought back over the meeting she had had with Lord Slytherin. It had been strange. But when was anything involving Lord Slytherin not strange?

She wasn't really sure if her offer had been appreciated, but she felt better for offering her assistance. At first she had considered giving in to society's demands and help Lord Slytherin do the same.

But in the end, that wouldn't change anything.

So she had decided to help Lord Slytherin weather the storm that was society's expectations, and find his way to a way he could live.

She would support him in this, regardless of his choice. If he either found a partner for a marriage of convenience or went down the path she herself had chosen. She would help him and with a little luck he would be able to change the way society saw people like them. Just as he was currently changing the way their society saw werewolves.

Shaking her head at her own foolishness, Amelia apparated home and, once she had arrived there, started to walk towards her own room.

All these grand wishes to change what others thought about asexuals. It was a naive teenager's
dream. One she had thought to have buried a long time ago. The only thing that really mattered was that she had offered her support and was determined to keep her word, should her support ever be needed.

Bent over his latest essay for Astronomy, Harry tried hard to concentrate. But it wasn't easy with a few first years playing exploding snap a few tables over.

He had tried to work in the library, but a few furiously studying Ravenclaws had laid claim to each of the tables. So he had come down to the common room. He supposed he could go into his own room to finish his homework – listing all the moons around the planets of the solar system – but sitting with his friends was better and worth the distraction caused by the loud noises of the explosive card game.

"I can't work here with this racket in the background!" Pansy exclaimed, jumped up from the cushion she had placed on the floor, and stormed over to the group of first-years.

"Poor little sods," Theo whispered as they all had to listen to Pansy sending the younger students packing.

Before Pansy had made her way back to their table, and before the first-years had packed all their stuff and left for their dorm, Harry felt the mirror vibrating. With a nod to his friends he stood and answered the mirror, walking over to one of the cosy corners to have a little more privacy.

.:Father. The meeting with Madame Bones is already over?:. Marvolo nodded, sitting in front of a bookcase, probably in his office at Griffin House. .:It was surprising. And short. Not one of my theories was even close to the truth:. Harry felt a tension leaving his shoulders he hadn't even known had been there. So the theory with the engagement hadn't been true either. What a relief.

.:So what was the reason she wanted to meet you?:. Just this morning Marvolo had contacted Harry to get his opinion about a possible engagement contract and other possible scenarios, and since then Harry had sat on pins and needles. Marvolo's reassurance that she had asked for a meeting in a private setting and not in her capacity as Head of Magical Law Enforcement hadn't really helped matters.

.:I think she just wanted to offer me moral support:. Marvolo hissed with surprise clearly written on his face.

.:Moral support?:. Harry answered, surprised at how well sarcasm translated into Parseltongue.

Marvolo laughed and started to recount the meeting while Harry listened attentively.

Sunday, 4th of February 1996

The usual din filled the Great Hall, and the moment the food appeared on the serving plates the big room filled with delicious smells. Only listening with half an ear, Harry picked his favourites – roasted carrots, mashed potatoes, and grilled chicken leg – and filled his plate to a reasonable amount. He would probably never be able to load his plate as high as Ron was wont to do, as a
plate piled that way reminded him instantly of Dudley and his disgusting eating habits.

"That can't be!" a girl exclaimed somewhere not too far away, clearly to be heard over the general level of noise. Harry tried to ignore the spreading unrest as a colourful magazine was handed around. By what Harry could catch of the cover, he suspected that it was the newest edition of *Witch Weekly*, which had been delivered this morning.

There weren't that many subscribers at the school – it was aimed more at adult witches like Ron's mother – but it seemed they once again had published something scandalous enough to stir true unrest.

Remembering the unfortunate article about Hermione and a supposed love-triangle, Harry decided to pay more attention. But that was no reason to abandon a perfectly fine dinner. Maybe whatever had been written would kill his appetite. He wasn't about to skip meals now that he finally was rid of the not-really-pleasant-tasting nutrient potion.

The comfortable Sunday evening stupor was broken the moment Susan Bones came to stand beside Harry – he hadn't really noticed her approach, maybe he was more tired than he had realised – slapping down something just next to Harry's plate, pointing at it and demanding in a commanding tone. "Did you know about this?"

Putting his utensils down, Harry took a closer look at what had been placed so forcefully beside his plate. It was indeed *Witch Weekly*, opened to a page with small snippets of text with various claims and facts about different celebrities. Harry had seen similar pages in those terrible magazines Aunt Petunia had read, always complaining about them and their tendency to exaggerate, but buying them nonetheless.

Susan's finger pointed to one snippet relatively close to the middle, right next to the moving picture of a quidditch player being walloped by a bludger. And it started with **Lord Slytherin courting Head of DMLE?**

Suddenly all his sleepiness was gone, and Harry carefully took the magazine in his hands sitting up a little bit straighter.

*Mysterious, handsome Lord Slytherin and tough Head-Witch of the DMLE have been spotted dining together in an intimate booth at the Floating Candle. They were talking behind silencing wards for hours. Is this the start of a most intriguing relationship?*

For a moment Harry closed his eyes. It was a wonder this hadn't come up in the gossip sooner than dinner. The magazine had been delivered with the morning mail. Maybe the fact that it was buried between all those other snippets near to the end of the pages had helped prevent it from being spotted sooner. But in the end that wasn't really all that important.

"I take it your aunt didn't tell you she had asked my father for a meeting?" Harry asked, handing the magazine back to Susan.

"You knew?" Susan seemed taken aback and truly confused. Not all that far from reacting unreasonably as far as Harry was able to guess.

"He told me because he suspected she might have an engagement contract between you and me in mind. And he called me again yesterday evening, telling me that Madame Bones had wanted to talk with him about something she overheard at one of the many functions this past season. Offering him moral support or some such. Not that I had expected to see their meeting mentioned in this… magazine." Harry shrugged. He wasn't really sure what to think of this. The only thing he
was certain of right now was that this probably would dominate the rumour mill for at least the next week.

Susan had her brow furrowed, gazing questioning down to where Harry was sitting on the bench. "Moral support? Why would he need that?"

Harry sighed. That really wasn't something he felt he could talk about to others. It wasn't his kind of secret to share. "Something personal. That's all I'm willing to say. Okay? It's not my place to share. Ask your aunt if you want to know more. Not sure if she'll be more willing to talk about it, though." Once again Harry shrugged, suddenly reminded of Draco's mother berating him for this habit. "But of one thing I'm certain: there's no courtship going on, or anything of that kind."

Before either of them could talk more about this piece of journalism, Professor McGonagall stood from where she was sitting right next to the empty seat of the Headmaster at the head table and without any serious effort had the attention of most of the students.

Susan quickly made her way back to the Hufflepuff table, taking the magazine with her.

"Good evening. I have an announcement to make." Those few words were enough to shut the rest of those students up who still had been whispering. "You all have noticed the absence of Headmaster Dumbledore. I have the sad obligation to inform you all that he will not be returning to Hogwarts, as he is retiring." That proclamation had the whole Hall filled with distressed voices. Mostly from three tables in the room. The Slytherin's were either not willing to make their opinion heard or were simply too refined to show their feelings so openly.

Harry suspected that most of the Slytherins would have liked to cheer but were aware how bad that would look, so they had tried for politely blank instead.

One of the worst reactions they could have chosen, according to all the lessons he had gotten in negotiations over the summer, both from Marvolo and his grandfather's portrait. If one showed emotions, the sudden absence of them almost always hinted at something they wanted to keep hidden.

"The Board of Governors has offered me the position of Headmistress, and after thinking about it, I have decided to accept." The Gryffindor table drowned out her next words with deafening cheers, whistling, and clapping. The more modest clapping from the other three tables didn't make a lot of difference among all that clamour. A stern – yet somehow still amused look – from their Transfiguration Professor managed to calm the Gryffindors down again. "Until we have found another professor for Transfiguration and it has been decided who will be Head of Gryffindor from now on, both Professor Snape and Professor Flitwick will act as deputy so the burden is distributed over more people."

While all around him the students began speculating who might become the new Transfiguration professor, and who the Head of Gryffindor, Harry mused that the meeting between his father and Madame Bones might not be interesting enough to be top of the talk after that revelation.

oooOOooo

The wind was howling around the house, the heavy rain against the windows filling the room with a lot of noise, almost drowning out the sounds of the merrily burning fire in the fireplace. The heavy cloud cover prevented the light of the full moon from reaching the ground, which was getting muddier by the minute.

Sirius sat on the floor of the south parlour on a thick woollen blanket, a few letters next to him, his
back to the fire. "Thanks for translating the parts of the letters for me that were French, Remus."
Sirius said, his eyes trained – again – on one of the two letters his daughters had send him.

The werewolf gave a small huff and placed his head down on his front paws, his amber eyes trained on his friend's form.

"It's impressive how good their English is." Sirius felt pride for his daughters' academic accomplishments. Going by what they had written about their schoolwork, he had every right to be. That they had learned English as well only added to that. "I'm not sure why their mother still insist on writing in French, though. I know that she can speak more than just French."

Remus gave a small wuffing sound that Sirius knew to be one of agreement.

Frowning, Sirius looked up from the letter he currently was holding and directed his gaze to where Remus had made himself comfortable on a small mound of blankets and pillows. The reason for his frown wasn't the fact that the blankets and pillows would be covered in wolf fur by the end of the night. No, the reason was the massive cage Remus had insisted on putting into the room.

"I think that you are overly dramatic, Remus. And I will repeat this several more times this night." The small sound Remus made clearly was one of resigned frustration with his friend. "You have taken your wolfsbane. And even if it should inexplicably fail all of a sudden, I still could transform into Padfoot and be safe. There is no need to keep you in a cage just because I wanted to write letters to Nawel and Enora."

Remus had decided to stay indoors because of the terrible weather that had been forecast for the region of Potter Manor, and Sirius had happily agreed. Rain, sleet, and strong winds in February wasn't really fun to run around in. Not if the alternative was a place in front of a warm fire.

Remus stood, turned a few tight circles on the blanket – in a move Sirius knew all too well from trying to make himself comfortable on a cold stone floor with only a threadbare blanket – and then let himself fall to the ground with his back turned towards Sirius.

Sirius snorted. His friend didn't need words to clearly communicate that Sirius' opinion on this wasn't appreciated. "Sulk all you want, Moony, but you know that I'm right. There is no danger here." The big wolf – looking so much healthier with every moon he was in Slytherin's employ – just continued to ignore Sirius, who gave a theatrical sigh, preparing to make a draft for the first letter he wanted to write.

Of course Sirius knew the exact reason Remus had insisted on the cage, which Sirius had to transfigure. The woods outside the Manor had been warded to make sure the werewolf could run there in the marked stretch of grounds, adhering to the law that demanded a werewolf had to make sure he or she was in a secure place during their transformations. Said secure place had been defined as a space either closed with locks and structures strong enough to hold a rampaging wolf, or wards designed to do the same.

The decision to stay indoors had left them without a warded space – Lord Slytherin only had warded the woods – and Sirius' objection to locking Remus in the wine cellar had ruled out the only structure strong enough.

This was Remus' attempt to comply with the law, making sure that his actions would never be grounds for overturning all the improvements that had been accomplished. But Sirius still felt it was silly.

"Do you think I should send Kreacher over to France and the summer home now? Or should I..."
rather wait a bit? Or even arrange for a wizard or witch to clean things up? It has been quite some time since the house was last visited by anyone from the family, as far as I know," Sirius mused. He never had been the most patient and wasn't prepared to out wait his friend.

Hearing the rustling of fabric and a big animal moving, Sirius looked up again. He laughed because his friend was wearing his *you-know-I-can't-use-words-in-this-form* expression. Lily had once argued with James for more than an hour over the fact they all had named a few expressions they knew from Moony, while she claimed a wolf couldn't actually make such an expression. Something about muscles missing that would be needed. The three of them had laughed it off – Remus staying neutral if amused at the whole discussion – and Lily had left with a frustrated huff.

Turning his thoughts away from this painful recollections, Sirius repeated the questions in a way that Remus could answer them in their long established pattern of one small wuff for yes and two for no.

"Sending wizards probably really is better," Sirius mused, having started another parchment to make notes for his preparations. He would have to ask Lord Slytherin if Harry could come visit for a few days during the holidays. "Maybe I should hire some curse-breakers. If the house is even remotely like Grimmauld Place… Maybe Bill has the time." Sirius hadn't seen the curse-breaker often, but the few times he had it had been obvious that the oldest Weasley son was planning to propose to his girlfriend. A little extra money to start them out probably would come in handy.

"Do you think it's too much if I ask them to stay the whole holidays?" Remus wuffed one time, and Sirius felt frustrated by the lack of words cutting short on what Moony could communicate easily. "Maybe I should get you some letter cards or something along those lines for nights with really bad weather," Sirius sort of asked, tilting his head to the side.

Moony shook his head, huffed, and curled into a furry mound, clearly ending his participation in the conversation.

Laughing, Sirius let the topic drop, instead concentrating on his letters. He needed to write three, and he'd better hurry up to make sure neither his daughters not their mother would have to wait long.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not all that sure about the long part between Marvolo and Amelia… only one thing is certain: she isn't ambitious and ruthless enough to marry a man for political gain who she doesn't really like, especially as Lord Slytherin isn't really able to offer her much in that regard. And Marvolo is too intelligent to risk letting someone get that close who has as strong moral convictions as Amelia Bones has.

Maybe I'll manage to write it so they become friends. Only time will tell.

On another note: any suggestions for Transfiguration Professor and Head of Gryffindor? I'm currently combing through canon to find candidates for both positions and haven't really found someone yet.

After a long pause I want to recommend another story to you all! It's "Letters to everybody" by Siebenschlaefer which can be found on AO3. She asked me a while ago if she could use the "Law of Haxby" I made up for this story. That's how I started
to read her stuff. It's good!

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who wished me luck with my other project. All went well ;) I managed to finish before the deadline and get it printed. Review number 4444 over at ff.net was made by DarkRavie. I like the way you always write the same ;) and I want to use this opportunity to once again thank all of you people commenting on my chapters. It’s fuel for writing I can really use. And Starfishz managed to push the number of followers of this story on ff.net to 5000! It’s so much more than I ever expected when I first started publishing! Thank you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday, 4th of February 1996

Severus sat down with a quiet huff in one of the more comfortable armchairs of the staff room. He would have preferred to go home to Sonja over sitting here waiting for a long evening of useless discussions to end. But he was aware that there were things the whole faculty needed to talk about now that Minerva had decided to take the position of Headmistress. So he resigned himself to endure what was to come.

And if he was rational about it, talking about all the various topics connected to that change on a Sunday evening was better than trying to fit such a meeting in between their lessons during the week.

But he wasn’t feeling all that rational at the moment. In fact, he really had to work on staying cool and collected and not frowning too much. Hadn’t he decided to accept the inevitable? Not having this meeting now only meant that it had to take place later.

Severus huffed, folding his hands over his stomach, slumping back into the chair a little. This really was the best way to go about this. And Severus worked hard to let himself actually feel that it was. With someone waiting for him back in their quarters, it was a lot harder than it had been in the past.

One after the other, his colleagues walked in, chatting with each other, clearly agitated over the news. Severus wasn’t sure why, but most of the professors had been convinced until quite recently – as recently as this past dinner – that Albus Dumbledore would be back at the school, soon.

Minerva was the last to arrive, closing the door behind her, and flicking her wand at the door, casting a basic privacy charm. Probably with the intend either to keep Peeves away, or to prevent students from eavesdropping on them. Not that this measure truly would change anything. Whatever they talked about here, any decisions they might come to, all of it probably would be all over the school in a matter of a few days. Experience had taught him that much.

“Minerva!” Pomona started even before Minerva had reached her chair and sat down. “That can’t be really true, can it? Albus won’t be back? What happened? Didn’t Poppy say he was better?” The Head of Hufflepuff turned to where the medi-witch was sitting between Filius and Rolanda, clearly
asking Poppy for her view on things.

Before the medi-witch could do more than huff – in a manner Severus associated with the expression the witch always sported when he wanted to leave the hospital wing early – Minerva sat down in the Headmaster’s chair with an air of authority, drawing attention to herself by the simple measure of beginning to speak.

“Albus informed me himself that he did not feel up to the task of being Headmaster of Hogwarts any longer. After that letter that somehow was leaked to the Daily Prophet, Albus said, he realized that he needed a lot more help, and Hogwarts would be better off without him. The Board offered me the position, and I decided just this afternoon to accept.” Just as Minerva was able to control a classroom full of teenaged dunderheads, she managed easily to control a group of highly curious teachers. “You can send him mail if you want to know more. But he asked me to convey his thanks to each of you for all your dedicated work at Hogwarts with him and for the good of our students. He planned to have relocated by now to a specialised clinic somewhere near the Nile Delta. But I don’t know if his plans have worked out.”

While muttering started all around the room – sometimes the resemblance between the teenagers they were teaching and the staff was disconcerting – Minerva got a roll of parchment out of one of her robe pockets and levitated one of the inkwells over so she could use it.

Only a sharp look from Minerva was enough to get everyone back to paying attention. Maybe the meeting wouldn’t drag on as long as Severus had feared. “With me taking up the position as Headmistress, we need to fill three positions on staff. The position of Transfiguration Professor and that of Head of Gryffindor, as well as the position of Deputy Headmaster or Mistress. I wanted to ask for your input.” Minerva let her eyes travel over the gathered staff. “Let’s start with the easiest position. Deputy Headmaster or Mistress.”

Severus felt the strong urge to roll his eyes. Easiest position. It was going to be a long night.

“Traditionally one of the Heads of House fills this position, and someone who already has had a few years of work here at the school in that position. Those requirements leave us with three possible candidates.” Sounds of agreement were heard all around the room. “I would propose to decide between Filius and Pomona, as Severus already fills the position of Hogwarts’ Potions Master in addition to being Head of Slytherin. That fact alone makes me think that he has already enough work on his hands. Don’t you agree, Severus?” Kind eyes were directed at him, and Severus had to agree with his friend’s assessment.

He was Potions Professor, stand-in parent for all Slytherins at the school, and brewed all potions used in the infirmary. That he also was the Dark Lord’s Potions Master and going to be a father within a few months time only added to the long list of responsibilities. And his title of Lord Prince – with all the added responsibilities of that – was still missing from that impressive listing of positions. “I agree.” There was no need to expand on that.

With a smile – apologetic would be the adjective Severus would use to describe it if he was forced to do so – Minerva addressed the Head of Hufflepuff. “I would like to offer the position to Filius, if he is willing to accept, as that would keep a nice balance.”

Pomona nodded and as one both women turned their eyes to the short figure of the Head of Ravenclaw where he was sitting on his usual place stacked with a high pillow to allow him easy access to the table.

“I’m honoured, Minerva, and gladly accept.” Filius answered with a small bow.
Minerva gave the Charms Professor a nod with a smile and turned back to the others. “It will be considerably harder to find someone to take on the position of Transfiguration Professor. Teaching teenagers isn’t something most aspire to.” While Minerva asked the room if anyone knew what had become of some of the students whom she deemed possibly competent enough to take up the position she was forced to leave as the new Headmistress, Severus contemplated her statement that few felt the call to teach young students. It certainly was true. Teaching at a school like Hogwarts was not without prestige, but those who had the skill to be great were more likely to take on apprentices than to commit their time to teenagers who had no talent or interest for their chosen field of study. As Severus knew from his own experience, time for research was limited to almost nothing when one needed to mark homework, set tasks for several classes a day, and worry over how to keep those doing poorly at the subject somehow close to the rest. He himself had quickly decided to weed out the students incapable of learning to brew under pressure. He had no patience for dunderheads unwilling to put in the work.

But he never would claim to be particularly suited to teaching.

Finding someone as qualified as Minerva was, would be hard.

“Didn’t Miss Switch finish her Mastery in Transfiguration a while ago?” Charity asked just as Severus returned his attention back to the staffroom and the discussion. “She might be interested in teaching. Even if she might not take the position for longer, she could help bridge the time until a new professor can be found.”

Minerva nodded with a small furrow on her brow. “I guess advertising in the Prophet and a few of the subscription magazines is the best way to find people interested in the position. Writing to a few of my acquaintances, and past students to find someone to help us in the short term seems like the most sensible thing to do.”

After that they moved on to the discussion of who might want to take the position of Head of Gryffindor. Traditionally, only someone who had been a member of that House in their own student time could assume that position. Interestingly enough, the number of former Gryffindors among the staff was rather limited, and Severus was determined to argue against appointing Rubeus Hagrid for that position. The half-giant might be skilled with handling the more dangerous – and the less dangerous – magical creatures, providing the potion stores of Hogwarts with lots of interesting and high quality animal parts for low costs, but Severus severely doubted the man’s competency as a caretaker for a herd of rambunctious teenagers.

Rolanda declined because she felt the need to keep impartial in her role as the Quidditch referee, and Charity didn’t feel suited to the position. A lot of the remaining evening consequently was lost to Pomona’s attempts to instil some confidence into the younger Charity – more than once pointing out how well Severus had done in his role despite his youth when starting – and everyone agreed that Hagrid had too many other duties already to add head of House to them.

Not even the length of a flobberworm nearer to finding a new head of House for Gryffindor, the meeting was postponed well after midnight, leading to Severus returning to his quarters only to find his wife already deeply asleep in their bed.

Quickly Severus prepared for bed, and then slipped under the cover right next to Sonja with a small smile on his face. The evening had been boring and tedious, but coming home to his love managed to lighten his spirits considerably.

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Rumours were a funny thing. As he had learned in his past – with the whole parseltongue reveal, or
the murderous godfather, and being entered into the tournament – as soon as something more
recent or more interesting came along the old piece of gossip just went forgotten. Maybe not for
always and ever – old stuff was brought up again when something new was discovered – but for
long stretches of time.

And so it had happened with the small snippet in Witch Weekly over the last few days. The fact
that Albus Dumbledore had resigned from his position of Headmaster, as it was reported, had
overshadowed everything else the students might have talked about. Speculation on who would
become Head of House for Gryffindor and who would take over Transfiguration classes had done
their part in pushing the life of Lord Slytherin and Amelia Bones, or any other celebrity for that
matter, out of topics to talk about. It had been a relief for Harry, as he had feared being questioned
by everyone if Amelia Bones was to be his adoptive mother.

Instead he had taken part in discussions among his peers, listing the wishes they had for a new
Transfiguration professor, and speculating who of the former Gryffindors able to teach would take
the position. Hermione had been terrified as Ron had brought up the possibility of Hagrid's getting
the position of Head of House.

At the moment Harry was walking down to the greenhouses to pick up Ron and Hermione, as they
wanted to go down to the edge of the Forbidden Forest together to gather plant matter they needed
for one of Professor Snape’s assignments.

“Hello, Harry,” a dreamy voice said, making Harry spin in place to locate the speaker. His rapidly
beating heart didn’t really slow down much the moment he realized that it had been Luna calling
out to him from where she was poking a stick into the remains of the snow from this past winter.

“I like this time of year.” Luna mused idly, returning to her poking of the snow. “Everything is
waking up slowly.”

Remembering long hours cleaning up the gardens at Privet Drive in preparation for the work to be
done a little later so it would look better than those of the neighbours, Harry nodded. After all, he
relished the days getting longer and lighter just as much as any other student of Hogwarts did. “The
change of the seasons is always interesting.” What an inane answer. The feeling of resembling the
fools drooling over the veela at the Quidditch World Cup made Harry blush.
He was almost going to turn again, wishing her a good afternoon, when he realized that this might be a good opportunity to ask his question. They were alone, not something that happened often, and it had been a coincidence which somehow managed to calm him somewhat because he didn’t want it to look too serious for some reason he hadn’t been able to pin down.

“Do you have any plans for the Hogsmeade weekend after Valentine’s? Because I would like to spend the day with you.” There. He had done it. He had asked Luna to go to Hogsmeade with him. And he even had managed to do so without stuttering. He held his breath anxiously waiting for her answer.

Those wide blue eyes with only a few strands of blond hair sticking out from under the brim of a knit hat of various blues, moved to look at him, and her serene smile was still in place when she answered. “That’s a lovely idea, Harry. So I guess we both now have plans for that day!”

“See you in Runes then, Luna.” Harry said happily. “I can’t let Ron and Hermione wait much longer.” Luna only hummed, turning back to whatever it was she was hoping to gain while making holes in a pile of old snow, while Harry almost skipped down the way to the correct greenhouse, a grin on his face.

This year was so much better than previous ones.

Friday, 9th of February 1996

A few days ago a letter had reached Bill sent by Lord Black startling a laugh out of the oldest Weasley child with the formal way of address. When he had opened it and seen that it was an inquiry to hire him for curse breaking work the laugh of incredulity had changed into a feeling of genuine interest.

The little he had seen of the Black Town House in London had tickled his interest with all the stuff that his mother had tried to clean out, or talk Sirius into getting rid off. So Bill had not hesitated to answer the letter.

Now he was on the way to Grimmauld Place to meet with Sirius and speak about the job offer. It sounded interesting enough, checking over a summer home to see if a human could live there safely.

And the payment Sirius had offered sounded anything but bad as well.

Bill reached the door to the dark house and used the knocker to make his presence known. Moments later the door opened to reveal the hallway and the small, wrinkly creature that was responsible for keeping the house in good condition. A task that clearly had gotten too hard for it to manage. Or at least it seemed that way to Bill.

“Master is awaiting you in the kitchen, wizard curse breaker.” The elf spoke without much of the reverence his brethren usually afforded all wizards and witches, and Bill felt reminded of the usual attitude goblins had towards the magic wielding humans. With a small smirk Bill stepped into the house, his fine tuned senses immediately picking up on the different sources of less than friendly
magic in the house. The most present magic he could feel were the many layered wards, cautious and waiting, accepting him as a visitor but a possible threat.

“Bill!” Sirius called out the moment the tall red-head stepped into the kitchen. “Thanks for coming! I really need someone to make sure the summer house in France is safe, and I couldn’t think of anyone I would trust more than you to do it.”

Bill laughed good naturedly at that obvious display of eagerness from the wizard who should have presented at least a little bit of decency. He was a Lord of the Wizengamot and the Head of an old family, after all. “Being close to home is well and good, but I have to admit, that I’m missing the work in the tombs. Getting to check over and clean an old house might be exactly what I need.”

Sirius waved at one of the chairs around the heavy table, sporting a set of tea and small cucumber sandwiches. “Take a seat. Are you happy with tea? Or do you want something stronger?”

“Tea is fine.” Bill answered, while sitting down on one of the heavy chairs with their mismatched cushions.

Sirius poured them both a cup of tea and sat down himself. “So you’re willing to take the job?” The older man asked adding lemon and sugar to his tea.

“If I wasn’t I wouldn’t have bothered showing up here.” Bill said with a bit of friendly mocking in his voice which made Sirius pull a face on him.

“Yeah. Stupid question. So, I need it finished before the spring holidays, because I want to invite my daughters. Have you heard that I’m a father to two girls? Want to get to know them better, let them get to know me… all that stuff. They are attending Beauxbatons, so meeting up in France during the holidays seems like a good idea. But just as all the other properties that house hasn’t been visited by any human since,” Sirius hesitated, stirring his tea while furrowing his brow in contemplation. “I don’t know, in too long. That’s a fact.”

Bill hummed in agreement. “So you expect the usual pests, boggarts, doxies and the like? And as it’s a Black property also some cursed artefacts, books on dangerous and maybe even banned magic?”

Sirius nodded in response, there wasn’t much to explain in that regard anyway.

“I certainly can clean such stuff out, and identify some of the nastier objects for you. As it was a house to live in there probably weren’t any of the dangerous curses there to keep people out completely?” Breaking the ancient Egyptian deterrents against human invaders had been his favourite part of opening up tombs for Gringotts.

“That’s probably correct. Even if I wouldn’t put much past my family in that regard. So I would advise you to be on guard when opening up cupboards, wardrobes, and doors in the cellar. I plan to send Kreacher along as well, he can do the actual cleaning of dust and other dirt that surely has accumulated with time.” Sirius sighed and tucked a strand of his hair back from his face behind his ear. “We’ll probably should set up some sort of contract, if you haven’t one for freelance work already? If not, I’ll either ask Remus or get my solicitor to write something up. Handling your payment, the expected work, what is to be done if something unexpected comes up… all that stuff.” Sirius waved his hand in the air to indicate all the boring stuff he couldn’t name in the moment and Bill nodded.

Maybe he should think about getting some sort of template for freelance work as Sirius had called it. If this endeavour went well he would like to take on more jobs like this in the future, to add
some spice back into his life. Even when his mother and Fleur preferred his new, safer line of work, he himself was missing the thrill and excitement of dismantling volatile curses.

“I’ve got here the floor plans. They were stored in one of the family vaults. I'm not sure how accurate they are. We need to decide how long this might take, so I know when you need to start and when I have to take you there to key you into the wards. Do you need a partner? I remember that there was a good reason why Aurors tend to work in pairs. I guess that same concern for safety applies to your work as well?”

It did, and Sirius agreed to go through the house with Bill on their first visit to get a feel for how dangerous the task would be. After that had been sorted they started to hash out what all needed to be written in the contract and what time lines they had to work with, as Sirius wanted the house finished by the start of the French spring holidays. They worked for well over an hour on planning to then slide into the retelling of some of the more amusing stories from Bill’s time in Egypt and Sirius’ time as an Auror.

When Bill finally left for his flat he felt happy with anticipation of an adventure that was promised to be rewarding in more than money. He really should strive to get more contract work like this in the future. Maybe even for the Ministry from time to time. Like the cleaning of that Inferi infested cave they had started on with Lord Slytherin but finished without the man. It was a solid plan and made Bill hum a happy little tune under his breath on his way home.

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Wednesday, 14th of February 1996

The morning of Valentine's Day dawned to reveal a day of cold miserable rain. But that didn’t seem to deter any of the older teenagers of being emotional and hyped over the day of romantic love. And for once Harry felt nervous along with all the others. In a way it was kind of ridiculous. But on the other hand it was something so normal, that he relished it. Sorting through his feelings in relation to Luna the previous Saturday with Mrs. Goyle had helped him realise that he at least had a crush on the blonde girl. He still felt like shrinking in his seat every time he remembered the truly embarrassing talk he had had with his mind healer that day.

It had been at least as horrible as the talk with Marvolo in the summer.

Theo handed him the plate with the scrambled eggs, still too sleepy to talk much. Over at the Ravenclaw table a girl was getting louder and louder, almost screaming at one of her housemates about a gift that somehow had managed to be insulting. Harry tried to ignore the giggling of the younger witches, the screaming match that had started to attract the teachers’ attention, and the nervous whispering among some of the older boys. He had sorted out what he had wanted to give to Luna, asking Dobby to make sure an owl would deliver his gift to the girl with the morning post the evening the day before.

When the owls started to fly in through the big windows, bringing with them a lot of small rain droplets, Harry had just finished a bowl of porridge with honey, nuts, and small pieces of apple. As he had found where Luna was sitting today prior to sitting down himself he had a prime view on her greeting the school owl carrying a small parchment roll charmed to repel water. She smiled her
usual serene, slightly absent minded smile, and gave a bit of her own breakfast as a treat to the
messenger.

Remembering Luna’s comment over spring and the slow awakening of all things in that time,
Harry had drawn pictures of some of the early blooming plants, those that were out as the first,
sometimes even before all the snow was gone, using the lack of leaves in the forests to get enough
sunlight to flourish.

He just noticed her smiling more happy than before when the loud crash of a large metal platter
falling to the floor drew his attention – as well as that of almost all people in the Great Hall – to the
Gryffindor table.

“Can’t you see he is using you!” Ron was screaming, his head almost purple, the colour clashing
horribly with his hair. “He’s a professional, famous Quidditch player. The best seeker in the
world!” Harry felt his stomach clench. He didn’t know all that much about romantic relationships,
but there was no way Ron could turn that beginning into anything that would be well received by
Hermione. The fact that they both had totally overlooked the fact their friend was a girl, and Ron
even had managed to put his foot into his mouth when asking her out to the ball, clearly seeing her
as a last resort, wasn’t going to work in Ron’s favour either.

Harry never got to hear what Ron had wanted to say, because Hermione suddenly was standing as
well, her hand curled into a fist, shaking, and screaming at the other Gryffindor with the same
amount of fury as Ron. “Are you doubting my intelligence? Or do you think I’m just not worth the
attention of someone as famous as Victor Krum?”

Daphne, sitting near enough that Harry could hear her, commented with something close to awe.
“The venom! Can’t you hear it?”

“She is going to cut him into ribbons with her tongue!” Astoria agreed with an obvious glee that
was a little surprising to Harry.

He himself wanted to vanish into the ground, embarrassed beyond belief on account of his friend’s
actions. They had grown apart since the summer, all the changes in Harry’s situation driving a
wedge between them, but Harry still wished his friend well. But at the moment Ron’s
impulsiveness was digging him a hole deeper than he could hope to get out of anytime soon.

“Let me be clear, Ronald Weasley! I’m not interested in you in any romantic sense. You just are
too immature. Grow up! I’ll decide for myself who I go on a date with. It’s not your place to even
think about such things. Leave me be!” And with that last declaration Hermione stormed off from
the Great Hall a late Ravenclaw jumping out of her way near the doors to the Great Hall.

The picture was eerily similar to one Harry had witnessed back in their first year. Hermione
storming away because Ron had been an insensitive prat. “I’ll better go look for her.” Harry
muttered to his friends, already getting up from his place, grabbing his bag. “Please excuse my
absence to Professor Slinkhard.”

“Will do.” Theo answered, while the others from his year muttered some words along the same
line.

Quick strides allowed Harry to quickly leave the Great Hall without compromising his dignity.
When had he come to always think about how the way he acted might influence the opinion of him
in the eyes of others? But that wasn’t important right now.

Getting out the Marauders Map from his book bag the moment he noticed that he couldn’t see
Hermione anywhere, Harry quickly checked where she had gone to, finding her name next to a dot in one of the unused classrooms on the ground floor. It wasn’t hard to follow her there. One of the bathrooms might have been a problem.

He could hear her muffled sobs through the not quite closed door, and before he knocked on it – one didn’t simply walk in on an upset witch if one didn’t want to be hexed – he took a few calming breaths, raising his occlumency shields to hopefully better be able to help his friend.

“May I come in?” Harry asked when Hermione didn’t react for quite some time.

She didn’t tell him to go away, which he chose to interpret as an invitation to join her in the classroom.

So he went in.

Hermione was sitting in a window to one of the smaller courtyards – Harry wasn’t even sure this one could be reached by any other means than climbing out of one of the windows – on the window seat, her legs pulled up and her head resting on her knees, face turned away from the door and towards the window.

Watching the raindrops run down the windowpane, Harry tried to come up with a good way to help Hermione. Being supportive wasn’t something he had much experience with. Neither watching others doing something like this, nor getting help in such a situation. Mrs. Goyle had an analytical way of doing things, getting him to come to conclusions on his own, Harry felt that wasn’t what was needed right now. Marvolo tried, but having next to no experience himself, wasn’t really that good at comforting another. Yet. Mrs. Weasley was too… oppressive for Harry’s tastes, and not someone he thought he would be able to emulate.

With a shake of his head Harry cleared away all the distractions. He was making the whole situation more awkward by just standing here. Just go for it would probably be best here. He hadn’t been a Gryffindor for nothing. He could wing it if needed.

“Ron is a prat, and has no real filter between his brain and his mouth.” That was nothing but the truth and got something almost like a chuckle out of Hermione.

Harry slowly walked over to sit at the other end of the window seat – avoiding the chairs and tables covered in dust – all the while sorting through his thoughts. “I’m not sure what Ron is thinking that made him react the way he did. But I know that he isn’t the most mature of our year. And he hasn’t got a mind healer to talk to for help on sorting out all those,” Harry floundered for a moment, playing with the hem of his robes, “feelings. I at least find them terribly confusing.” That got a real chuckle out of Hermione, making Harry send a mock glare her way, which made her chuckle more, settling back to sit a little less hunched over. “But despite the fact that I understand being confused about feelings, I agree with you. It’s your decision who you go out with on a date and spend time with. And I can totally see what Victor sees in you.”

Harry felt out of his depth, but the small trembling smile Hermione send his way let him think that he hadn’t done too bad.

“So, you had confusing feelings to sort out?” Hermione asked, a dangerous twinkle in her eyes, effectively deflecting the conversation onto another topic.

Harry sighed. “I had. But I have a feeling that you noticed long before I did. Didn’t you?”

She nodded. “I think that I did. Yes.” She grinned and moved one of her feed to nudge one of his.
“You and Luna?”

He didn’t even try to keep the stupid grin from his face. “She just sees me. Harry. You know? I… I’m not sure where this will lead, but I’m willing to see for myself what it can be.” Hermione’s tear streaked face was brightened by a soft smile at Harry admitting to his developing feelings for the younger Ravenclaw girl.

“Yes, I think I see. Now more clearly than ever. Before uncle Xerxes made me his heiress I was the clever muggleborn for many. After, I suddenly became the heiress to an important and infamous family. It wasn’t that big of a deal. You, and Ron mostly, treated me just the same. As does Victor. The younger and older students, those I never interacted with that much changed their behaviour, though.”

The bell announcing the start of the first lesson sounded. Suddenly Hermione was on her feet. “We’ll be late for our first lesson! Harry! How can you let me mope here? Get up! Hurry! We can’t be late!”

Now it was Harry’s turn to chuckle, getting up from his perch much slower than his friend. This was such typical Hermione behaviour that he was pretty sure that for the moment at least Ron’s blunder was gone from the forefront of her mind.

Maybe he could get the twins on their brother’s case. They both certainly had a better hand at interacting with the witches in Gryffindor than Ron ever had managed so far. They might be able to help their younger brother see what he had been doing wrong.

They parted ways soon after reaching the entrance hall and Harry managed to only be about ten minutes late to Defence. Professor Slinkhard simply waved at Harry to take a seat, once more deep in a lecture over the value of de-escalation and the duty of friends to intervene before an actual fight could start.

The rest of the day passed by in a blur that seemed all too familiar by now. Only the constant whispers over the drama they all had witnessed were a difference to any other day since the winter holidays had been over. By the end, after dinner and another study session in the Slytherin common room – spend patiently explaining the differences between different flicks of the wand in charms to Vincent and Gregory – Harry wished the others pleasant dreams and walked into his own room.

Careless, trusting in the charms on his bag, Harry led it fall next to his desk, getting rid of his shoes on his way to his bed, where he sat down and let himself fall back to lie on it, staring at the canopy.

He was in need of holidays. For a moment he wondered what this year as Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived, would have been like if Marvolo hadn’t chosen this way. The less violent way. He was pretty sure he wouldn’t be a Slytherin now, and probably he wouldn’t have all the time he was investing into his studies, he would still be stuck in Divination, and seeing as he had needed Mrs. Goyle’s help – who was his mind healer only because Marvolo had insisted – he wouldn’t have a date with Luna this coming Saturday.

Sighing deeply, Harry sat back up and went to retrieve the mirror Marvolo had created for him. The adoption of Marcus had been stalled and Harry wanted to know what was happening on that front and if Marvolo had made any progress.

“He!” Marvolo greeted only moments after Harry had spoken the man’s name to the reflective surface, which now no longer was showing Harry’s face but the sweaty one of Marvolo.
“What are you doing?” Harry asked, feeling curious. There wasn’t much that could get a wizard to sweat if he was able to use magic. And Marvolo certainly had no reason to not use magic to get his menial tasks done.

“Conjuring pottery.” Marvolo gave a deadpan answer. “I’m frustrated and there’s no one with time for duelling practice. So I’m conjuring pottery just to blast it apart in the next moment. One could say that it’s cathartic.” It looked like the man was shrugging, and then the background moved, indicating that Marvolo had changed his position.

“So, it didn’t go well?” Why else should Marvolo be frustrated?

“I wouldn’t necessarily say that. All the stuff about whether I’m a good guardian, and if Marcus would be happy with us. That is done with and went well. But they want to verify that Marcus really is a parslemouth. And now they are uncertain how to prove it. Obviously they can’t take my word for it. Or yours.” Marvolo was shaking his head, pinching the bridge of his nose, probably cussing up a storm in his head.

Harry himself made a face because it sounded so stupid. “What do they want to do instead. Have him order a snake around?”

“In essence. But they say it can’t be one he already is familiar with. One of the simpletons from the Department for Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures said they simply could conjure one. I was this close,” he held up two fingers almost touching each other, “to conjuring one myself to show them what a monumental stupid idea that would be. I advised them to get in a snake from a muggle zoo. A constrictor of some kind. One of them said they had thought something smaller would be less intimidating for a young boy… I truly hope they will talk with the expert I recommended to them. He works with snakes regularly, as he collects their venom for potions ingredients.”

They talked for a while longer. Harry re-telling Ron’s blunder from this morning and Marvolo complaining about all the paperwork he had to finish, and how Nagini had knocked over his inkwell over and over again because she had been bored. He was looking forward to summer and even warmer spring days, so she could go out onto the grounds of Potter Manor. That possibility would cure her of her boredom better than anything else. When Harry’s yawn lasted for several seconds, Marvolo laughed loudly. “Go to bed, Harry. You need your sleep.”

Harry nodded, yawning again. “I guess you’re right, father. Pleasant dreams.”

For the first time they both realised in the same moment that Harry had called Marvolo father where no one else could hear them. They froze, unsure how to process or react to this. Not even sure if this was the first time that this had happened. In the end Marvolo was the first one to recover, ignoring the doubtlessly important moment. “I wish you pleasant dreams as well, Harry. I’ll keep you up to date on the adoption.”

“Thanks.” Harry answered still unsettled over the fact he had become so accustomed to calling Marvolo father that he hadn’t noticed he was doing it when it was only the two of them.

Later as he was buried under the covers and almost asleep, Harry realised that he didn’t feel bad about the development. Since the day Marvolo had adopted Harry the man had done everything in his power to be a good father. And as far as Harry could say at the moment he had managed to do a good job.

Feeling content and not unhappy with the way things were at the moment, Harry drifted off to sleep.
Thursday, 15th of February 1996

Sitting in a comfortable rocking chair on the balcony which belonged to his apartment, Albus enjoyed the book he was currently reading, the nice weather, and the view. The Sachmet Clinic was a most convenient mixture of specialised hospital for ageing wizards and witches and hotel, or better yet, apartment complex. It wasn’t exactly cheap to get treatment and housing here, but the long standing tradition of this place to accept unusual cases for lower fees made them the absolute experts in the field.

In getting a place so fast Albus’ celebrity status may have eased the way. But in the end the unusual circumstances of his mental health had been the deciding factor as he had since learned from one of the healers in charge of his care.

After only a few days spend here all of the reservations Albus had had about leaving his brother’s place had vanished. He now was sure he gladly would spend the rest of his life here, secure in the knowledge that he would find peace here and never would harm anyone ever again.

He still felt greatly unsettled over how far his mind had slipped. His decision had been right.

His mid-day meal popped into existence right next to Albus, breaking his musings, on the small table he had used for his meals whenever the weather was favourable. Like today.

With a smile on his face, Albus moved to a wicker chair – it simply was easier to eat while not rocking back and forth – and picked up the utensils to start on his meal of rice, stuffed vine leaves and humus.

Once he was finished eating, the plate vanished and Albus rose. Maybe he should go out and take a stroll through the gardens which were littered with wells and fountains, the sculptures of noteworthy healers and gods and goddesses, as well as boards for various games. He had seen chess and nine men’s morris but also a few he hadn’t seen before. Maybe one of the other residents would be able to explain the rules of how to play them to Albus.

Before he could make up his mind the chime sounded drawing his attention to the slate next to his door where names of people showing up with the wish to visit him were displayed. When he had been shown his rooms he had been given an explanation on how the slate worked and he had spent most of the first day examining the intricate charms work.

The name stated on the slate now was that of Amos Diggory. What did the man want here? Albus picked up the charmed piece of chalk and made a check mark next to the name, indicating his willingness to accept the visitor. If he didn’t want to see someone he simply would cross out the name. Not that he had had that many visitors up till this moment.

Curious why Amos Diggory, who had lost his son not even a year ago, was now visiting him here in Egypt, Albus moved into his sitting room and ordered a tea set to share with his guest via another slate mounted to a wall there.
“Amos, come in, come in!” Albus greeted his guest a few minutes later when the tall man appeared at his door. “I just ordered some tea. Why don’t you come in, sit down and have some?” It was clear to Albus the moment he had opened the door that Amos wasn’t happy. But why he looked so out of sorts wasn’t really as clear.

They sat down and Amos started the conversation with small talk, the usual stuff, weather, the hospital and the gardens it was situated in. But curiously enough the goings on of politics back home – a staple of small talk and gossip – was suspiciously absent.

After almost three quarters of an hour in the same range of topics Albus had enough. “Amos, you haven’t come here to speak with me about the differences in weather between London and Alexandria. As I have seen only recently the prices for international portkeys are too steep to contemplate buying one just to visit a casual acquaintance for a cup of tea. What are you here to speak about?” Because Albus was certain that Amos wanted to talk about something. The way he had hesitated several times, searching for words, but in the end clearly selecting a different topic had been an obvious give away.

For a moment it looked like Mr. Diggory's face was filled with loathing. But quick as a blink the man looked more like one who had lost all hope, than one preparing to murder another human being.

“Why have you given up, Headmaster? Why did you stop fighting? How shall I manage to oppose evil if you are not there?!” With each word Amos voice had risen in volume, going from a resigned, hopeless almost whisper to a beseeching shout.

Albus was stunned.

“I have given up? What evil should I be fighting in your eyes?” Albus had a feeling he already knew what evil Amos was speaking about. But that certainly wasn’t true, was it? Had his delusions dragged others down with him?

“He-who-must-not-be-named of course! He is corrupting the children with his so called school, and that adoption program! But with your sudden, unwarranted retreat he’ll find much less resistance!” There was a glint in the man’s eyes that looked a lot like a need for revenge.

With carefully chosen words Albus tried to relax the situation while also gauging how far Amos would go in his chosen mission. “Lord Slytherin’s actions have been all within the boundaries of the laws as far as I can judge. In what way do you think he is corrupting the children?”

But the wizard wasn’t inclined to answer any questions. “Why, Headmaster? Why have you run? Why did you leave the floor to the man who murdered my son?”

Aware of the quite real possibility that this confrontation might turn violent Albus tried to look calm and collected while he answered. “My health is no longer what it used to be, Amos. I’m told about things others witnessed me doing, but don’t remember them happening. You certainly can see how that can unsettle a person. The healers in this place are the best in treating ailments of the mind caused by old age and certain magics. It simply was my best option to search treatment here.”

He was exaggerating of course. The letter he had written to the Minister, which then had somehow found its way into the Daily Prophet, was the only thing he had no clear recollection of writing. But overstating his health problem might work in his favour here, giving Amos a way to rationalise Albus’ retreat from the political stage that wouldn’t result in immediate violence. “Have you gotten help to cope with your grief?” Outliving a child was said to be one of the greatest hardships that could happen to parents. Maybe that possibility for violence Albus could so clearly feel from the other wizard was caused by the trauma and grief caused by his son’s death.
One again ignoring the question, Amos stood, leaving his one cup of tea only half finished. “So once you’re better you’ll return?”

Trying for a casual stance, Albus stood as well, smiling his best grandfatherly smile. “I try to abide by my healer’s advice not to let myself be distracted from my current main focus by planning too far into the future.”

That answer, while totally untrue and much too vague to hold any valuable information, seemed to be what Amos had been wanting to hear. He smiled and gave a small bow. “Then I’ll return back home with the hope that you’ll be back in top form soon, able to rejoin our efforts to rid the world of one of it’s larger evils. Have a nice day.”

And he was gone, out of the door and probably halfway to the apparation area just outside the clinics wards.

Feeling weak in his knees, Albus slowly sank back down onto the divan he favoured in his sitting room – the vibrant colours just suited his tastes the most – and took a deep breath. What a strange encounter.

Could it be that the true figure behind the changes in the policies in the adoption process had just revealed himself to Albus? And were there more? The way Amos had talked it did seem likely that he had been at least involved in that somehow.

But all that aside the much bigger question was if Albus needed to do something. And if he chose to take action. What should he do?

Albus managed to go into the gardens that afternoon and wandered among hedges and under palms, pondering what he had learned. He really hadn’t decided by the time he went back to his rooms for dinner and a quite evening meditating. He needed more time to come to a conclusion.

Chapter End Notes

I’m back! And I tried to jump a little forward in time. Other configurations would leave out quite a bit, or put the focus too much onto only a few characters. I hope the way I decided to go about things works out well.

Recommendation: “Nose to the Wind” by Batsutousai on AO3. I love a good do-over story!

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Sitting behind his desk, going over possible investments for the money Marvolo had managed to accumulate -- by carefully investing the loan Lucius had given to him at really generous conditions -- the sound of a house-elf popping into the room drew Marvolo’s attention.

Flimm was standing there in his snow-white linen towel, proud and without fear, waiting to be acknowledged to deliver whatever information he had come to impart. “Yes, Flimm?”

The elf came to attention and spoke in its slightly squeaky voice. “Blond wizard Lucius waiting in Floo room. Here to speak with Master Marvolo. Flimm said he would deliver message.”

Even if Miss Granger was mistaken about freeing all the elves, she seemed to have a point about treating them with some respect. Flimm was a lot more pleasant to be around than many elves Marvolo had had contact with in the past.

“I’ll be there in a moment. Set up tea for two in the drawing room and bring my guest there.” Marvolo didn’t know why Lucius was here, as he hadn’t called for him and there had been no pre-arranged meeting this day.

So it probably was something important.

A few minutes later Marvolo walked into the drawing room and Lucius rose from his armchair only to sink down to one knee and bow his head. “My Lord.”

Not willing to lose time over some silly formalities, Marvolo waved his hand somewhat impatiently and walked straight to his own favoured armchair. “Rise and sit down, Lucius. I gather you have something important to report?” Short flicks of his fingers had cream and sugar float into his cup, which then filled with hot tea, courtesy of the floating teapot operated by Flimm.

“That’s correct, my Lord. By chance I overheard a few wizards from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures talking about their decision to set up a test for the ability of parseltongue with a conjured snake. They seemed convinced it was the most hassle-free way to go about things. I clearly remember the description of the conjured snake as confused and dangerous in the text I learned that particular spell from when I was a teenager. I thought it best to make sure you knew of this as soon as possible, my Lord.”

Closing his eyes and counting backwards in increasing steps, Marvolo automatically fell into a relaxing breathing pattern. Those absolute ignorant and dangerous idiots!
He opened his eyes once he felt that he had calmed down enough. Then he took a few minutes to drink his tea before looking back at Lucius, who seemed paler than usual.

“Thank you for informing me, Lucius. I fear I’ll have to influence the process more than I had planned to, in the end. But I can’t simply allow them to set a conjured snake loose near a child that young.” He stood. “Flimm will see you out. Have a good day.”

Not waiting for Lucius to leave, Marvolo called his cheapest and most unremarkable cloak down from his room with an accio. Where he was planning to go now, standing out wasn’t something most should do. Not that it would be a problem for him, but today he really would prefer not to draw attention.

In less than five minutes Marvolo had apparated to a spot in Knockturn Alley that was used by all those who preferred not to be seen in the more socially acceptable places around here. And most of the time the upstanding witches and wizards totally agreed, preferring not to see the less friendly and beautiful.

With decisive strides, Marvolo made his way over to the specialised apothecary he had visited before. It had been around back when he had finished school, and once or twice he had helped out with their animals for some extra money. They didn’t make enough to hire someone to help, and in the end the place hadn’t offered the opportunities Marvolo had been after. Even if his unique skills had been – and still were – an exceptionally good fit.

Now he came here to hopefully get the owner, the son of the man he had worked for back then, and an expert on snakes to accompany him to the Ministry. A small bell rang as Marvolo stepped through the door and into the slightly musty and darkened interior of the specialised apothecary. The place where everyone bought snake venom who needed the best ingredients.

“One moment!” A call came from the back, from the door behind the counter covered with a tattered curtain.

So Marvolo waited a moment, listening in to the idle, sleepy chattering of the snakes all around in the different enclosures. They all were as close to the snakes’ natural habitats as magic could make them. Marvolo nodded in approval. That snakes were treated well always had been something that had been of great interest to him.

“How may I help?” the owner, Marten Singer, asked while stepping through the door and up to the counter. When Marvolo turned around to answer, he saw the wizard’s eyes widen in surprise. But the man kept standing, neither his father nor he ever had been associated with the Death Eaters.

“I’m here to ask for your input as an expert on snakes. The Ministry needs one, but the people in charge of the situation are stubborn and insist that conjuring a snake is just as good.”

“No way!” Mr. Singer interrupted, wide eyes even wider in surprise.

Marvolo nodded, grim. “I hope taking care of some of the work they seem to think is too much, will help them be more reasonable. Do you have time?”

He had time and so they moved quickly to get to the Ministry as fast as humanly possible. Marvolo didn’t explain why exactly the Ministry needed an expert on snakes. Better to keep his involvement as small as possible.

He was so frustrated with the stubborn, short-sighted people working on this. He wanted to get Marcus home. It all really was taking too long.
Marvolo worked on his patience while they arrived at the Ministry, waited in line at the security desk, waited for an elevator with enough space for two people, waited in the elevator on their way to the right floor, and then walked down said corridor dodging people who wanted to talk with Lord Slytherin.

At first Marvolo had planned to go directly to the Department responsible for getting the test with the snake sorted out. But that would make it obvious that he had involved himself with acquiring an expert for them. So they went to the office of Mrs. Wispy instead.

“Lord Slytherin! What a surprise!” They were greeted with her usual cheeriness, while she hurried through her stacks of parchment and books like she didn’t care she might topple one of them. For a short moment Marvolo wondered if she had this skill of avoiding toppling them because she knew the layout of her office so well, or if she would be able to do that in any room filled with random unstable stacks of objects.

Shoving that idle thought aside – even though it was a puzzle he would love to solve – Marvolo brought a strained smile to his face. No need to hide his waning patience with the proceedings from the woman so intent to get families united. “Mrs. Wispy, a small owl told me that you are in need of an expert on snakes. And as I feel the process shouldn’t be delayed any longer, I thought I’d bring someone I know to be competent and independent.” He turned halfway back to the wizard behind him, waving to point the witch’s attention towards him, for an introduction. “This is Mr. Singer. Owner of an apothecary specialising in snake parts, and more specifically, venom.”

The two exchanged polite greetings, and then Mrs. Wispy turned towards Marvolo. “I knew you would be able to point us in the direction of an actual expert. I tried to talk sense into them, but they brushed me off, claiming they were the experts on all things creature. I tried to tell them that they’re not experts on all things animal, just because they can spot a kneazle among a litter of kittens, but they were stubborn.” A hint of a mischievous smile, and a wink, was sent from Mrs. Wispy to both wizards. “I’ll just claim that they were being slow and I managed to find an expert they’ll have to work with now. Come, I want to inform them!”

Amused by her obvious glee to rub the noses of her colleagues in their incompetence, Marvolo followed without fuss, thinking he could claim to have visited to inquire into the progress and tagged along because he had been asked to.

Easily enough done.

It didn’t take long until they came near the doors to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures and slowed down when they heard loud voices from a cubicle near the main entrance to the Department.

“We need to make an appointment with the school,” a deep voice said.

“Can’t we just send a summons to a test here at the Ministry?” the answering voice almost whined.

“No! Because the one being tested is a small kid,” there seemed to be a silent idiot tacked on there, “and Mrs. Wispy insists we need to be cautious, take measures to make the child feel safe,” there was a derisive snort, probably from the person being talked to, “but I think if the kid can talk to snakes, it’s not really worth the hassle. It’ll turn dark anyway. Just look at that Potter boy. Resorted into Slytherin, he held on pretty long, but now he’s on the slippery slope into darkness. Friends with a werewolf, I heard.”

Marvolo clenched his hands, taking deep even breaths. Maybe he should get some Aurors down here to keep himself from attacking those people. Instead he strengthened his Occlumency shields.
and made himself a promise to memorise everything he could about those people and wait for an opportunity to ruin their lives.

Before the two men – judging by their voices – could say any more infuriating and incriminating stuff, Mrs. Wisby decided she'd had enough and walked around the corner huffing like an enraged hippogriff. “I’ll let you know that I’ll handle the matter from here on out! Really! What has the kid done to you?” She waved Mr. Singer forward, while Marvolo took a step back so he could observe from the shadows. “This is Mr. Singer. He owns an apothecary and trades in snake parts. He’s an expert in how to handle snakes and will be the one arranging and conducting the test. Your Department won’t be needed any longer.”

“Now see here! You can’t do that! We’re the experts and the process demands that the test for family magic is to be done by an expert prior to the adoption being concluded! And we are the experts on creatures in the Ministry. So you can’t toss us out,” the wizard with the darker voice, the one proclaiming Marcus a lost cause to the dark because of his ability, concluded smugly. Marvolo committed his face to memory and paid attention so as not to miss the moment Mrs. Wisby or one of the others would finally name some names. All would be so much easier if he didn’t have to search for them before deciding what to do.

“Nowhere is it stated that the expert needs to be from the Ministry. Amos Diggory declared your department the experts, but the fact it took you this long and you still haven’t decided what form a test needs to take to verify the existence of the gift of Parseltongue in a child, suggests otherwise!” Huffing in obvious frustration, Mrs. Wisby gave both wizards a disapproving glare, which reminded Marvolo of the face some of the caretakers at Wool’s had had down to perfection. He had perfected not showing his reaction to it pretty early on, but it never had changed the fact that such glares had sent cold shivers of dread down his spine.

Not being the one the glare was aimed at, in contrast, had some kind of reassuring quality. How odd.

“I had thought better of you, Neil, and you too Albert.” Dismissing the two angry and flummoxed-looking wizards, Mrs. Wisby turned to Mr. Singer. “Have you got some time so we can discuss how you would set up a test for the ability to speak with snakes for a child?”

With a clear grin on his face – it seemed as if the man had enjoyed the show – Mr. Singer nodded. “I came with time to spare. One thing I can say for sure now, we should get a non-venomous snake for this. Oh, and Lord Slytherin shouldn’t be there.” The look Marvolo got was apologetic, but he only shrugged.

“I always knew that I can’t be there. It was added to the procedures when they were re-worked. That’s not a problem. I’m just glad that now an actual expert will design and oversee the whole thing.” And he honestly was. The thought of Marcus having to converse with an angry, conjured snake, probably a venomous one... it simply was too much.

Mrs. Wisby took Mr. Singer to her office to discuss the test setup, and Marvolo slowly made his way back to the entrance hall to floo back home.

And while he was on the way – ignoring the curious looks he still was getting – his thoughts started to circle again.

They still hadn’t found the individual, or individuals, behind the disastrous changes in the adoption policies. And here he stumbled over two people in the Ministry obviously still harbouring animosity against him. Willing to condemn a child as young as Marcus as being dark – which practically was synonymous with evil in their books – just because of an ability he had been born
Neither seemed to be important enough to have the influence needed to effect the changes they had discovered, remove roadblocks for Miss Summers, or keep out of the limelight while doing those things.

But Mrs. Wisby had brought up Amos Diggory, a man who was all around well known and well liked. And who had a very good reason to be against everything that Marvolo might want to pass. Only now that Marvolo had been a father for a while and looked into growing their family, did he understand what it must be like to lose a child. He always had known the devastating effect something like this could have on a person, a weakness he had seen and used back then, but only now did he feel that he might actually understand why.

Maybe he should set a few of his people to looking into Diggory and his two friends in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

While thinking about the possible after effects of his off-hand order to Pettigrew to kill the Diggory boy, Marvolo had started to pace, berating himself once again for his stupid error back when he had been a teenager. Maybe he needed to find a way to make sure the book he was writing, gathering all the information on Horcruxes there was, would be available to anyone considering such a foolish move.

He had forgotten where he was and how long he had been pacing here when a woman suddenly spoke to him. “Why are you pacing here? One of the Aurors saw and informed Rufus and he sent me, because he was worried. What’s on your mind, Lord Slytherin?”

Marvolo turned to the voice and saw a contemplative Madame Bones standing there. “I guess I got sucked into fruitlessly contemplating the long-term effects of tragic events.” Because even as the official story said he had been pressured into going along with the resurrection ritual, and had watched helplessly while the young man had been killed, the fact that all that had been supposedly caused by a curse he had come in contact with decades earlier made it somehow his responsibility.

Madame Bones probably had seen his confusion over the whole mess he had created in a bid to start fresh. Smiled a friendly smile. “I offered you moral support. I guess listening to whatever had you pacing here for over an hour, scowling so darkly that a seasoned Auror was frightened enough to go to his superior instead of taking the situation in hand, is the least I can do.”

Smiling despite himself, Marvolo nodded his assent. “I guess sitting down, a cup of tea, and another point of view might actually be of help.” If he was careful to stick to his story – which he should be able to do easily – Madame Bones’ insight into the workings of the Ministry might actually be helpful to unravel his vague impression of the whole situation.

They retreated into Madame Bones’ office, where they drank tea and spoke for over two hours.

Ron knew that he had once again managed to screw up completely. The reactions of everyone around him for the last few days would have made it more than clear, if he hadn’t noticed the moment Harry followed Hermione out of the Great Hall Wednesday morning anyway.

All the girls in Gryffindor had started to glare at him, Hermione had avoided him, and Dean and
Seamus had acted as if they pitied him. Ron wasn’t so sure that they weren’t joking behind his back. Neville had sided with the girls.

It was so unfair.

Everyone was on Hermione’s side. Ron just knew how they all said that he had hurt her. But not one of them even stopped for one moment to see that she had hurt him too!

And so he walked here, down one of the less-often-used corridors, while dinner was still going on, brooding. Why didn't one of his friends see how Hermione was ignoring him? They had been friends for so long. And still it seemed as if he didn’t even register as a possible boyfriend for her.

She even had said as much.

Balling his hands into fists, Ron made a tight circle in the hall, to avoid punching the wall. Even in his frustration he knew that punching a wall of solid stone wouldn’t end well for him.

Life was unfair! Why had Krum snatched Hermione up just before Ron himself had noticed that she was a girl? He had known her longer!

Scowling at nothing, Ron was so distracted by his thoughts running in circles that he didn’t notice the moment someone stepped out of an empty classroom behind him, following him with steps so quiet a silencing spell must have been applied.

But he couldn’t miss another figure stepping out of a door a little further ahead.

He stopped, looked up, and scowled at his older brother Fred instead of the floor. “What do you want?”

“Ickle Ronikins, why so aggressive?” asked the twin who had followed the younger brother. “We want to talk. Nothing more.” Ron turned around so his back was to the wall and he could see both twins – it always was a good idea not to have the twins at behind you – the fact that neither held his wand helped only marginally with Ron’s nervousness.

What were the twins planning?

“Let’s talk in there.” Fred said waving a hand towards the room he had just stepped out of. Suspicious about the whole situation, Ron followed his brother, one hand sliding into his pocket to grab his wand. Were the twins on his side or on Hermione’s?

The rooms was like so many other empty classrooms all around the castle. A few tables, a handful of chairs, a blackboard, and a teacher’s desk, with dust everywhere. George walked up to the teacher’s desk, sitting down casually on top of it, swinging his legs. The other twin stayed by the door, leaning against the wall, probably to make sure Ron couldn’t run.

Unable to relax, Ron took to pacing between the haphazardly arranged furniture.

“Harry made us aware that you could use the advice of an older brother. And we have to admit that we have been remiss in our duties.” The seriousness both of his brothers were maintaining made Ron even more worried. They never were like this. They always joked whatever the situation, they always found something to make fun about. And in a pinch they would poke fun at each other.

“And why doesn’t he speak with me himself?” Another thing that had irked Ron since Wednesday. Harry had followed Hermione out of the Hall, but hadn’t talked to his oldest friend.
The twin on the table looked a little surprised by that. “Ron, you have been avoiding everyone. He thought you needed space. He approached us this morning because he’s worried, Ron. And so are we.”

Ron scoffed and threw himself into one of the chairs. Turning away from his brothers. Harry hadn’t even tried to find Ron so they could talk. He had the map, it should have been easy enough. If Harry really wanted to.

“What made you say such a thing, Ron? Why did you imply that no one could find anything interesting or desirable in Hermione? We know that you find her beautiful. Like most of the rest since the Yule Ball during that tournament.”

Ron shrugged but stayed silent. Of course they were right. Ron had dreamed of her, and wished she would go on a date with him. She could be funny, and she wasn’t bad-looking, breathtaking when she wanted to be. Ron cursed his rotten luck that Krum had realized it sooner than he had.

“Ron.” Fred started in a tone of voice Ron knew too well from their mother. She used it whenever one of them was being stubborn. But hearing it from one of his siblings let something break in Ron.

“I listened when she prattled that nonsense about house-elves! When she insists on repeating the whole bloody test after we finished it. I endure her nagging! I’ve known her so long already. Why? Why won’t she date me?” If he had been any less frustrated and angry, he probably would have been mortified over the sound of desperation in his voice, over the fact that he exposed his innermost thoughts to his two brothers. The two brothers who had always pranked him, avoiding the older brothers and the little princess.

George furrowed his brow, placing his hands next to his legs on the tabletop, leaning forward. “You know, just because you’ve spent some time with her, did something a few times you think she should be grateful for, you’re not entitled to her time and attention!”

Fred took over with the same intensity before Ron could form any response. “She’s her own person. You could spend handfuls of Galleons, sing her self-written serenades, cook her favourite food, and she still has the right to send you packing.”

Ron narrowed his eyes. Why should efforts like that go without a reward?

“Ron, you wouldn’t feel happy if – I don’t know – Bulstrode was interested in you, would you? Would you agree to a date just because she sent you love letters? Sent you a butterbeer over at the Three Broomsticks?”

Bulstrode, that girl from Slytherin he thought of as the ugliest of the bunch, would be a horror. “I never would go on a date with her!” What could that girl ever do to win his favour? It simply was impossible.

“Then don’t be a dick, Ron,” Fred said, walking over to give Ron a pat on the shoulder. “Love isn’t like classes and marks, or gardenwork. Just because you put some effort in doesn’t guarantee you the outcome you wish for.”

Gaping like a fish out of the water, Ron stared at his brothers.

“We think you should take some time to think things over. And to distract you from what else is going on, we wanted to offer you a job this weekend.”
“Exactly,” George said from his place on the desk, now a little more relaxed, “we have rented a spot for a booth again. And we want to sell our newest merchandise. We could use another set of hands, and you’ll get paid. You in?”

Still in shock over the image that he might be expected to go on a date with Millicent Bulstrode if she should ever make an effort – what he had been doing with Hermione was different, wasn’t it? – Ron just nodded and soon was once again alone.

Were the twins right? He wasn’t really sure. Did he think that someone was obligated to go on a date with someone who just put in the effort? Was a date something you could buy?

Ron made it back to the common room just before curfew and still wasn’t nearer to an answer.

oooOOOoo

Saturday, 17th of February 1996

It was the Hogsmeade weekend after Valentine's Day, and the whole student body was in nervous titters over it. Well, all students third year and up. The weather had been dreadful the last few days, and today looked like it would become a reasonably nice day. Harry looked up from his place at the Slytherin table to the ceiling of the Great Hall, watching the big fluffy white clouds floating over the bright blue sky.

“What do you think about Miss Gamp? I’m not sure she’s that good at explaining the theory,” Theo asked Harry while adding more egg to his plate.

“I guess only time will tell.” Harry answered, returning his gaze from the ceiling back to his classmates at the table. “The first-years seem happy with Miss Switch. But can one of you explain to me why they get the teacher with a Mastery and we only get one that intends to start studying for a Mastery?” That had been a problem he had puzzled over since the new temporary teachers had been introduced Thursday morning.

“No idea,” Draco said from Harry’s left side. “Maybe she's better in the topics we’ll need for our OWLs? I hope she is! One subpar teacher is enough.” For a moment Draco frowned. As Harry had learned since he was closer to the Slytherins, the blond really was invested in good grades.

“Next year we’ll probably have a new professor. And Gryffindor will have a new Head,” Daphne added her own knut to the conversation. Harry nodded, cutting up a sausage, and wondering who might take over from Headmistress McGonagall. There weren’t a lot of Gryffindors among the staff.

“Why are you checking on the weather every few bites, Harry?” Theo suddenly asked, catching Harry glancing at the ceiling again, a small grin on his face. “Have you planned something special for your date?”

Harry felt himself blush and cursed the fact that he did. Now all the girls would pester him for details. Assuming a better posture Harry looked over to Theo and raised a brow. “Haven’t you?” That brought about a few sniggers from those sitting near enough to follow their conversation.
Theo laughed. “Touché, Harry. So the weather plays a big role in your plans?”

Harry finished his breakfast, grinned, and got up from his seat. “It does. And I better hurry and check that everything is organised as it should be. See you lot later.”

And with that Harry was walking out of the Great Hall in the direction of the kitchens. He needed to check with Dobby that everything was ready and which signals they would be using.

What luck that it wasn’t raining.

oooOOooo

The group which walked down towards Hogsmeade was a mixed bunch. Gryffindors, Slytherins, and Ravenclaws, as well as an international Quidditch player. Harry was grinning from ear to ear, walking next to a happily humming Luna, looking up to the bright blue sky. It had been happy coincidence that they had arrived at the doors at the same time. They had decided to walk down together, as the weather was cold, but nice and sunny.

Ginny and Michael Corner, from Ravenclaw, walked hand in hand right behind Hermione and Viktor, who were talking animatedly about some historical text they both had read in the last few weeks. Parvati and her sister were walking with their group, laughing and planning to enjoy the day together, ignoring all those with dates. Daphne, her sister Astoria, Pansy, and both Vincent and Gregory were trailing behind the couples, making jokes.

Both Draco and Theo were walking further down. Draco on a date with Millicent, and Theo with Lisa Turpin from Ravenclaw. He had informed Harry that he had been surprised that she had asked him, but had accepted because she was nice enough and he wanted to practice. When Harry had looked sceptical Theo had shrugged. It wasn’t as if Lisa expected more than a nice afternoon with tea and sweet cakes in Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop.

Harry wasn’t sure that he really understood, but it seemed that all those who had to expect an arranged marriage after they had finished Hogwarts tended to go on dates with different people as long as they still could. Or at least the boys did.

Looking over towards a skipping Luna, Harry grinned and discarded those heavy thoughts. He wanted to enjoy the day. The future would be here soon enough.

“Viktor and I’ll go to the bookstore first!” Hermione called back towards Harry, the moment they reached the village.

Harry waved, while their group quickly disbanded when everyone started to walk to their first destination for the day, and turned to Luna. “Where do you want to go first?”

“I need a new quill,” she said swirling in place, stopping with her face towards Harry.

He smiled a little helplessly. “So, Scrivenshaft’s?” They had the biggest selection of quills and inks.

Luna hummed and snatched Harry’s hand, skipping towards the building which held the shop selling stationery. While Luna flitted from shelf to shelf as a butterfly would flutter from blossom to blossom, Harry watched with a happy smile. Luna seemed so happy all the time. He knew that
people tended to make mean comments about her and to her face, but despite all that, she found happiness. Harry selected a new inkwell as his last one was running low, and then went over to the register to pay. “Luna, may I pay for your quills?”

She had selected a bunch of brightly coloured quills, simple goose feathers patterned in fantastic colours. Green with swirls, blueberry and purple with spirals, ruby-red scale patterns, and what looked like tiger stripes. “Thank you, that’s really nice of you.”

After that they walked in silence along the road towards the spot near the Shrieking Shack where Harry had arranged with Dobby to have his plan set in motion. Somehow Harry felt nervous over the silence that normally was so soothing. Maybe it was the fact that this wasn’t matching with anything he thought a date should be like? But should he even try to conform to some unclear expectations?

“I hope you like a picnic, Luna. I’ve asked a friend to organise something for us, right there on that patch of grass near the Shack.” Why, oh why did he have to be so nervous?

“That’s a nice idea. Mum often had a picnic with me. The last time it was raining, so we brought the basket into the living room and spread out her favourite blanket. She told me about the moon frogs that day.”

“Moon frogs? Where do they live?” Harry asked, leading Luna towards the spot that had been prepared by Dobby. There was a blanket on the ground, red and white gingham. The moment they stepped onto the blanket and felt the warmth of an area warming charm, Luna kicked off her shoes and sank down to sit in tailor fashion, beaming up at Harry.

He stripped off his hat and the scarf, along with his cloak, as it would get too warm quickly if he kept them on. “Dobby, a house-elf friend I made in second year, agreed to make us a basket.” Just then that basket popped into existence between them, and an eager Luna opened it up.

“Do you want a tuna sandwich?” Luna asked, handing him one, which he accepted gladly. Suddenly the silence wasn’t strained anymore. It was glorious. Birds were singing, the crowd of students in the village and their laughter and cries, the smell of spring from a few early flowers near where they were sitting in the sun filled the air.

After the sandwich was finished, Harry got out a pitcher of lemonade – charmed not to spill anything unintentionally – and two glasses, pouring them both a glass. “It’s nice out here,” Harry observed, sipping at the cooled lemonade. Magic was a wonderful thing.

“Yes, much nicer than the tea shop,” Luna agreed, rummaging in the basket for something, until she came back up with a cauldron cake, smiling.

“You’ve been to Madam Puddifoot’s? I haven’t been yet,” Harry asked, interested.

“Yes. Last year. One of the boys asked me for a date on a dare. It’s much too cluttered with stuff trying to make it look romantic. But it attracts Wrackspurts and other things that might confuse people. And the tea wasn’t nice. This is much better.” She bit heartily into the cake.

Harry laughed. “There aren’t many options for a date here. Don’t you think? I would ask you out to go to the cinema, see a film together. Or to an amusement park. Maybe eating something in a nice restaurant.” He shrugged. “Well, besides the cinema, everything I can think of we can do here in the village. There aren’t that many acceptable activities for dates, are there?”

“What defines an acceptable activity for a date?” Luna idly asked, sipping her lemonade and taking
another bite of her cake.

“No idea. Society?” Harry hazarded a guess.

Luna hummed, moving her head from side to side in contemplation. “Wouldn’t it be better if the people going on a date would define what is an acceptable activity? Don’t you think?”

That made Harry pause, taking a small bowl of cut fruit out of the basket. “I guess that would be better. But in my experience, society has a way of getting into everything, judging what’s right or wrong, and letting everyone know its opinion.” Like the gossiping women of Little Whinging, and the middle-aged witches who read witch weekly, reacting to sensationalist stories about the romantic lives of teenagers.

“I know,” Luna simply said, clearly remembering the many taunting calls, and people stealing her stuff.

With a sigh, Harry leaned back on his arms, looking at Luna. “And do you think that this is an acceptable activity for a date?”

“I think it is. Society and what they call normal are overrated,” Luna decided and took out a fork, then scooted over so she could get some of the fruit salad.

“But it’s not easy to really ignore society and all its rules and expectations,” Harry stated, spearing half a grape with his own fork, holding it towards Luna in offer on a whim.

Luna grinned and took the grape off the fork with her mouth, offering her own fork to Harry.

“I guess it would be, with how many expectations rest on you.”

They talked about moon frogs next, and from there they jumped from topic to topic just as those frogs were wont to do.

It was late afternoon when they started to go back to the school. It had been a really nice, if confusing, afternoon. Never had Harry discussed so much philosophy in one day.

oooOOooo

Opposite from Zonko’s the twins had set up their booth for the day. After the success from the cracker booth before the Christmas holidays, Ron kind of understood why they had decided to repeat the attempt to sell their stuff from a booth.

But he was irritated about the way they had made him help. While Fred and Lee Jordan were handing out boxes with those ridiculous hats and collecting the money, George loudly called out the advantages of the Headless-Hat. “Surprise your friends and enemies! Scare them witless! Vanish your head and see others lose theirs!”

As he had been instructed, Ron once more put on the absolutely hideous hat, just glad that it vanished together with his head. The students walking by laughed, and Ron made a half-assed attempt at imitating a headless ghost.

This was so humiliating. He would have liked this job much better if he could just stand at the
booth, collecting the money. But both Fred and George had insisted he demonstrate the hats for their customers.

While Ron repeatedly removed his hat – a silly thing with feathers – and put it back on, he watched as Hermione walked hand in hand with Krum from the bookstore to the hideous pink Tea Shop.

How normal and boring. All couples went to Madam Puddifoot’s Tea Shop. Ron had thought Krum would be above such average dates.

Or maybe Ron was just jealous that Hermione wasn’t interested in him. Because if he was honest, he didn’t have any other ideas for a date than going to the Tea Shop. Dean had told him that there were a lot of small booths, where one could sit next to their date, which made snogging so much easier.

That thought made Ron uneasy. How far had they gone? And did he really want to know?

Ever since his brothers had spoken to him yesterday, he’d been plagued by the thought of Bulstrode expecting him to go on a date with her just because she had invested time or money in him.

He hadn’t really slept last night. The thought of how horrifying that idea was, and his concerns that really was what he had been doing had kept him awake. Which was another reason he was so cross today, together with this horrible job and the fact that Fred and George had dragged him from the Great Hall down to Hogsmeade much too early. He hadn’t even had time to finish his second helping of scrambled eggs and mushrooms. The two had absolutely no respect for a good breakfast when they thought making money was more important than not being hungry.

It didn’t really take long until all the hats were sold. Even those they had used to demonstrate had been sold. While Ron helped with packing everything away, he watched Hermione walk back in direction of the school, Krum at her side. They were laughing and obviously having a good time.

Ron felt incredibly sad. It had taken him so long to see Hermione as a girl, and now he knew that he would love to be her boyfriend, but also that it was too late.

At least for the moment. Because how long did relationships over long distances last? And Krum certainly got enough attention that he had more temptation around to find someone other than Hermione.

Not that she was someone unworthy of his attention. Rather the other way around. Krum wasn’t around much, Hermione deserved someone who could spend more time with her, share her interests… Ron interrupted his thought process here and moved one of the last empty boxes over to the stack where the rest was gathered to be vanished.

If they hurried up they would be back in time for dinner. And Ron was hungry.

Sunday, 18th of February 1996

Since Amos had visited him, Albus had returned several times to his pondering of what he should
do with his suspicions. He wasn’t really sure that he really had seen what he thought he had seen. Even thinking this, he wasn’t sure it even made sense.

As he did often, Albus walked through the gardens looking on while others played, or sat on a bench watching the different birds pecking at seeds and searching for insects. Getting the exercise the healers insisted he should get, and the sunlight he craved. Most of his life he had spent in Scotland or at other places on the British Islands. The amount of sun he could get here in Alexandria was something different.

When he came across an elderly wizard from Canada – they had played a few games in the past few days – sitting at a board set for checkers, but missing a partner to play... Well, he couldn’t very well let the man wait there for longer, could he?

“May I sit here?” Albus asked and after he got a nod in response he sat down on the carved wooden chair – almost a stool – and made his move as the man he only knew as Will had started immediately once he had asked to sit there.

They sat a while, moves being made back and forth. The sound of the pieces being moved over the stone of the board, the warm breeze in the grass all around, and the calls of a lot of different birds were all that was heard.

Then Albus broke the silence. “There is an acquaintance I know who might be in trouble. And I’m unsure if he really is in trouble and what to do if he is.”

The only response he got was a grunt, but he really hadn’t expected more than that.

“If what I thought I saw is true, then he could do harm to others. Lots of harm if he should decide to go another route, if political manoeuvring isn’t enough for him anymore,” Albus said, moving one of his pieces to claim one from Will. “But if I’m wrong… would me telling someone do him harm?”

And here he was again. A moral conundrum that demanded he make a decision whose interest was more important. Amos’ right not to be slandered, or the need to protect a person from bodily harm, and maybe others, children? Three interests were involved here. Amos with his grief, Tom and his attempt at a second chance, and that of all the children who had a chance at a loving family if they could be adopted.

He didn’t feel confident that the adoptions always would turn out good, and still feared that magical children would be taken from loving muggle families. But was that the most important concern here?

His long pondering and the distraction cost him one of his own pieces, but in the end this was only a way to pass the time, not something he wanted to win desperately.

“If I tell someone that there might be a problem, that he might try to harm another, the other could be on his guard, couldn’t he? And if I’m wrong?” Albus sighed. All his instincts, his long-held beliefs, told him to trust in Amos. He was an upstanding member of society. In contrast Albus hadn’t trusted Tom and the boy’s intentions since the moment he had met him in the orphanage. Maybe even before that.

But he himself had always thought that he was an upstanding member of society as well. And his actions hadn’t been good in all instances. He knew this now. But he hadn’t then.

Could it be that Amos was so injured still by the death of his son that he wasn’t thinking clearly?
If that was the case, the man needed help.

Could Albus do what his brother had done?

Get help for Amos even though he didn’t want it?

But whom should he tell?

In the end Will won the game, as Albus was too distracted to make a real effort. “Thank you, Will.” He said, standing and walking away, as Will set the board back to its starting configuration. Another partner for another game would walk by eventually.

Chapter End Notes

Writing Luna is always an adventure, but definitively fun!
Thank you all for your comments! I really like hearing your thoughts and speculations!

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Monday, 19th of February 1996

Just after classes finished for the day and before dinner started in the Great Hall, Harry made his way up to the owlery. Ever since he had gotten the two mirrors enabling him to communicate with Sirius and Marvolo, much as he would have been able with a phone, there hadn’t been much need to send Hedwig out to deliver any letters. She still came by most mornings, sometimes staying for a while, nicking stuff from his plate, and Harry was always happy to see her. Today he had decided to go visit her for a change.

The date with Luna had been great, but now he wasn’t really sure what to do next. The two had agreed to meet up after dinner and then spend some time in the library together. Harry wanted to draw some more and had asked Luna if she would be his model. She had agreed under the condition that she was allowed to read, as she had found an interesting book on extinct – or as she insisted, allegedly extinct – magical creatures.

Dating was so terribly confusing. By now he had seen and not ignored – at least not with imitating retching noises as Ron had done since second year – enough snogging between couples to be curious to try it himself. But he felt so completely unsure how to even get to that point, that he had decided to visit Hedwig. He hoped to have time to think away from his friends. As much as he loved having a big group of friends, they didn’t help him get his thoughts sorted out.

Maybe he should simply ask Luna if she wanted him to kiss her, or if she wanted to kiss him. Anything that went any further made Harry even more nervous, while at the same time he tended to get the book – which so many of the other boys had wanted to borrow – out from where he had placed it out of sight to read it at night.

Being a teenager really was confusing.

But the moment Harry stepped from the stairs onto the floor covered with small bones, feathers, owl droppings, and patches of half-digested fur, all thoughts of having time to himself flew away.

Ron was standing in one of the open arched windows, his small owl Pigwidgeon fluttering around him in obvious agitation. But as that owl always was that excited, Harry really wasn’t paying the small bird much attention.

Hedwig came down from one of the higher perches, and Harry walked over to where she found a place not out of Harry’s reach, his steps making enough noise on the dirty floor to be heard over the sound of wind, birds, and the slow dripping of rain from the roof edge.
“Hi, Hedwig,” Harry greeted his owl, carefully stroking the incredibly soft, white feathers on her breast. He chuckled when Hedwig assumed a pose making his stroking her breast easier, almost looking like she was posing for a picture.

Harry tried to ignore Ron, and the sounds his friend made at the other side of the owlery, but it really wasn’t easy. Maybe he should go down to one of the courtyards. In this weather it was almost certain he would be alone there.

“Harry?” And there went that idea. Keeping his face pleasant, Harry turned around to show Ron that he had heard him.

“Yes?”

Ron shuffled his feet, looking everywhere but at Harry, a deep blush clashing horribly with his red hair. “Thanks for sending Fred and George after me.”

Harry shrugged, feeling decidedly awkward. “They certainly know much more about relationships than I. And, well…” Harry turned back to pet Hedwig some more, an excellent way to avoid looking at Ron. “I felt that you might possibly have an easier time accepting help from them.”

For several minutes both Harry and Ron stayed silent, each focusing on his owl, ignoring each other and the comings and goings of the different owls.

“I don’t understand what Hermione sees in Krum. But I guess I can’t make her like me that way. Can I?” Ron finally said, not reacting to Harry’s admittance to his lack of experience. “So I’ll try to catch her interest?” It sounded more like a question than a statement.

“And how do you plan to go about that?” Considering his two friends and their respective interests, Harry wasn’t so sure that Ron would succeed. He was an avid fan of Quidditch, adventure, good food, and had a knack for coming up with tales Trelawney would like, but not much else. Hermione, on the other hand, had several interests that were tied to studying, like Ancient Runes and philosophy. The way Ron had only grudgingly supported Hermione on her quest for house-elf freedom and rights – not that Harry had been any better – let Harry think that the two of them hadn’t all that many interests in common.

There was a frustrated sigh. “Not sure.” Ron walked over the floor, crunching something under his feet, to lean against the wall near to where Harry was standing with Hedwig. “Maybe spending more time studying, with her of course, could help.” Ron shrugged and Harry had to grin.

“The fact that it’ll help you do good in your OWLs certainly won’t hurt either. It’s a plan, Ron. Not sure if it’ll work, but it certainly sounds better than yelling at her.”

Ron nodded thoughtfully. “Girls are so bloody confusing. Not sure how the twins do it. Asking a girl out, I mean. And Dean always talks about the girls he has kissed during the summer. Even Percy managed to get a girlfriend!” Ron suddenly exclaimed, startling a few owls into flight. “Can’t be that hard if even Percy managed it.”

Harry wasn’t so sure about the implied idea that it should have been hard for Percy to find a girl willing to go on dates with him, but he decided to nod slowly anyway. “Hermione isn’t the only one around. I think everyone can find a partner somewhere, even if it’s kind of hard and a lot of work.”

They stood in silence for a moment, Harry searching for something to talk about that was somewhat safer territory than girlfriends, Quidditch, or classes, but that wasn’t too much of a
“Are they still together?” Harry finally asked, the only topic that came to mind and was even somewhat safe. While Ron thought about his answer, Harry felt the need to contemplate if Ron would even notice a sudden shift in topic for what it was. A diversion tactic.

“I’m not sure. Percy didn’t write so far. Not that I even want him to write. But Mum tends to complain about him working too much.” Soon Ron was deep into a long rant about how not one of his whole family was even able to see him among all the older, talented, and accomplished brothers.

Harry didn’t interrupt him once, only making the expected noises at the appropriate times to keep him going. This rant wasn’t something new, and Harry felt that it might do Ron some good to get all those feelings of envy off his chest.

They left for the Great Hall together in time for dinner. When they split to go to their respective tables, Harry smiled. That had been the longest conversation they had had in some time. Maybe he would be able to keep Ron as a friend, even though he had been sure for a while that the closeness they had shared in their first years at Hogwarts would never return.

Xerxes sat in a comfortable armchair – nicely padded and with a cushioning charm – waiting for his Lord to return and reading his latest letter from Hermione. She had written at length of her rendezvous with the international Quidditch star Viktor Krum. He simply had to smile at the way she concentrated on the description of their debates over various academic and political topics. Other girls – and boys for that matter – probably would have concentrated on the places they had gone to on the date, or how they had looked, what their partner had worn. The better he got to know his heiress, the more he was convinced that her focus was an academic one.

The door opened, admitting Lucius and Benjamin, followed closely by Marvolo. So Xerxes folded the letter and slipped it into his pocket, a smile on his face.

“Thank you all for coming,” Marvolo started their meeting – Xerxes had been early to play a game of chess with Marvolo and had lost dramatically – after they all had taken a seat. “Did you find information on those two from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures?”

Lucius took over the conversation to answer with the findings the other three had made. “Neil is the wizard Neil Smith, a parchment-shuffler mostly. He is the wizard responsible for the werewolf registry, and naturally is invested in the continued existence of said registry.”

Marvolo nodded in acknowledgement, and a tea tray popped into existence on the small table in the middle of the seating group that had been set up in Marvolo’s study. Marvolo filled a cup for each of them by floating first the teapot and then the cream jug before finally adding sugar, one floating cube at a time.
Ignoring all that impressive wandless magic, Lucius continued to give his report. “Albert is most likely Albert Thomas. He’s the one in charge of checking applications for licences. You know, those that one needs to keep kneazles or crups.” Accepting his floating cup with a nod in thanks to their Lord, Lucius took a sip, and then continued, while the rest of them took their cups to sip at their tea.

Xerxes quickly covered his reaction to the tea. Marvolo had a tendency to just add a tad too much sugar to almost everything.

“Both of them have been seen with Amos Diggory more than once. At office parties, during lunch break…” Lucius took a sip from his tea, giving a delicate shrug with only one shoulder. “People seem to believe they’re friends.”

For a moment there was silence between them. Until Marvolo finished one of the delicate biscuits that had been provided with the tea. “I guess the fact that those two are utterly unremarkable and without any true power is the reason none of us ever attempted to get to know them better?”

Xerxes smirked but refrained from commenting, but Benjamin nodded. “The werewolves who allied with you, my Lord, weren’t interested in the registry beyond defying the order to go and register. And getting influence in the office handing out licenses to crup breeders… well, the Floo Office certainly had priority.”

“I want you all to search for the tiniest bit of dirt you can find about those two. If they have accepted bribes, have dalliances outside of their marriages, are visiting disreputable pubs…” Marvolo made small circles with his hand next to his face, clearly indicating that the list of possible blackmail material wasn’t complete. “I want to know it all. And while you’re at it, see if you can find proof of any involvement of those two in the mess that was made of the adoption process.”

They all accepted the order willingly, and then turned to the preparation for the next Wizengamot session.

Wednesday, 21st of February 1996

It had taken some time to work everything out. Bill had needed to arrange for a day off. Sirius had had to wait to get an international portkey to France. But today everything was ready. The curse-breaker and he would take the portkey, then Sirius would apparate them to the house. Once they were there, Sirius had planned to call on Kreacher so he would be able to help with the dust they were sure to find.

“Have everything?” Sirius asked Bill where they stood in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. The red-head was checking his satchel for the fifth time in the last few minutes.

“I think I do. Or, let’s say, I’m trying to convince myself that I have everything I’ll need. Because how dark can a vacation home get, right?” Bill answered grinning from ear to ear.

Sirius laughed. “Do you really want me to answer that? I fear it’ll turn out to be filled to the attic
with dangerous, cursed books, statuettes, and poisoned silverware.” It had been a while since he had set foot into that particular house. If he remembered correctly, it had been the summer before he had started at Hogwarts and had dared to be sorted into Gryffindor. “Not sure when the last human was inside that house.”

“But you know enough to apparate us there?” Bill wanted to know, reaching once again to sort through the many different items neatly arranged inside the satchel, before visibly restraining himself and closing the simple leather knapsack.

Sirius knew he probably had a wistful smile on his face, but he didn’t care. “I have many a fond memory of that place. I’ll get us there safely.” The memories were all tinged in both sadness and fondness, maybe even in equal measures. But it had been the last summer that his parents had seemed to care about him. He hadn’t been happy with everything they did, but he had been able to pretend that they were harsh sometimes because they cared.

Shaking his head, Sirius pushed that ache aside. He would make new, good, memories there soon. Dwelling on the past too long wasn’t a good idea. As Remus regularly reminded him.

“Then let’s go!” Bill was almost sending sparks into the air around him with the enthusiasm for their planned endeavour. It made Sirius happy to see the youthful happiness Bill found in his chosen profession, even as it reminded him painfully of how James would get when they had started planning a new prank.

Both of them took a good grip on the simple wood disk carved with the location the portkey was set to and the activation phrase and one word had them both hurtling through space in a whirl of colours that made Sirius dizzy.

ooOoo

The first impression Bill got from the summer cottage was one of wary watchfulness. The second one was that the garden was almost as bad as the one around the Burrow.

Or maybe not. His mother usually had the more dangerous plants under good control. It looked like there might be some devil’s snare hiding out under a thick bush of yew. They would have to check the small garden around the house as well.

The pathway up to the house from the gate thankfully was bare of any plants, dangerous or otherwise. So Sirius and he didn’t have to be cautious on their way up to the door.

Bill had his senses stretched out before him, almost tasting – at least this was the closest he could come to describing it – the wards around this place, which reluctantly accepted the visitor the owner had brought with him. He felt like skipping, or bouncing on his toes, like the moment just before they were allowed to open their Christmas presents back when he had been barely nine years old. This was so much closer to what he had done, and loved, back in Egypt. He, mostly alone, and the wards on a place he wanted to make safe to walk through. The lake inside that cave and all the Inferi inside it had been a challenge, and working in such a big team a new experience, but this was the reason he had decided to go into curse breaking in the first place.

They reached the door, and Sirius pressed his hand against the door, murmuring something under his breath, much too quietly for Bill to make out any words.
The door – dark wood, intricately carved and decorated with silver-coloured nails – swung open into the hallway, and Bill got his wand out.

“If I remember correctly, there's a kitchen in the basement, next to a potions laboratory, a wine cellar, a pantry, and a laundry. You know, where clothes are washed, dried, and so on.” Sirius waved at a small door set into the wall, next to where they entered the house. Just one look was enough, and Bill was sure that this house had been expanded through liberal use of expanding enchantments.

“There's a dining room, a tea room, a drawing room, and a conservatory with attached patio on the ground floor.” Sirius waved in the direction of the doors on both sides of the corridor leading away from where they were standing. “Upstairs there are several bedrooms, each with a small bathroom, another drawing room, a game room, and the small staircase leading to the attic.” Bill whistled, impressed over the amount of space someone had been able to get out of the unimpressive cottage. It sounded as if it was at least four times the size on the inside.

“And what’s up in the attic?” Bill wanted to know, looking around in search of the usual signs of magical pests which tended to settle into abandoned magical houses.

“Elf quarters, a storage room, and an owlery, as far as I know. It's possible that there’s more up there, but the kids never were allowed to go up there. For all I know, there’s a zoo or museum up there.” Sirius waggled his eyebrows in an attempt to lighten the mood. Not that Bill thought the tension in the air was in any way distressing. Quite the opposite really. He loved it.

“So we start with a sweep of the ground floor, working from here towards the back, and go up from there?” Bill asked, more in an attempt to include Sirius than to ask for the wizard’s approval. “I would like to dismantle or mark the most dangerous things we might find, before going into the finer details.” That had always been the protocol in any tomb: get in, make sure nothing behind you could trigger, and sweep the whole place for hidden nasty traps that might trigger in the back because the door had been opened.

“You’re the expert, Bill,” Sirius said. “Do you think it’s safe to call Kreacher? I would be happier if all the dust was gone before we start exploring.”

Bill shook his head. “No, not before we've finished the first sweep. Take one of my dust masks.” Bill opened his satchel and got out the two masks which were designed to cover nose and mouth and filter the air, so that even the most dense sandstorm wouldn’t impede the wearer's breathing.

So warded against dangerous dust and coughing fits, the two wizards carefully made their way into the house, wands drawn and repeatedly casting detection spells. When Bill had to place the first marker stone – a small rune-inscribed stone – to disable a charm designed to divert attention, which had deteriorated to a state it was trying to draw in all attention, Bill was glad he had brought a lot of those in two small bags inside his satchel.

This was going to be fun!

ooOoo

“And there were more Doxies than I had thought I would ever see again at one time! Not even in the curtains at Grimmauld were so many.” Sirius was talking animatedly, and Harry listened with
amusement he didn’t bother keeping from his face.

“Did you find any boggarts?” There had been one in a desk at Grimmauld Place, so Harry thought it was only too plausible that there would be one at the summer cottage as well.

“Indeed we did!” Sirius said, waving his hands around so much that the image of him in the mirror moved out of focus, the bed hangings blurring in the background. “But we only marked and sealed the drawers, cupboards, and even a sewing basket, where we found them. Bill said he never had seen so many of them. Remus was astonished as well. He speculated they might have been breeding recently.”

“Don’t they just, I don’t know, pop into existence?” Harry was truly curious. While Remus had made sure they knew where they were likely to encounter dangerous creatures, and which they were, and how to fight them, their actual lives – procreation, behaviour, etc. – hadn’t been covered for all of them.

For a moment Sirius looked startled, then slowly shook his head. “I have no idea, Harry. But we decided to get more help before we get rid of those. I can’t say…” Sirius eyes got darker, and he suddenly stopped talking, changing the topic to talk about the nest of small, bright purple spiders they had found in the piano in the music room Sirius had totally forgotten about. But Harry didn’t need Sirius to tell him that he wasn’t sure if the boggart would turn into a Dementor for Harry’s godfather. He agreed that in this instance, caution was the better part of valour. They certainly had the time to prepare properly before confronting the boggarts.

“Bill will return a few times to dismantle some off the stuff we found, and then Kreacher’ll go in to get rid of the dust and spiderwebs. Clean the windows so that the sun can reach the inside again. Make the house habitable again.” As if someone had flipped a switch the eager anticipation on Sirius’ face changed to nervousness. “Do you think Nawel and Enora will like me?”

Slumping a little in his seat in front of the big fireplace in the Slytherin common room, Harry tried to put what he felt into words that would be reassuring and something clear enough. He feared that he would start rambling if he wasn’t careful.

“I don’t know them personally,” Harry finally started when Sirius started to look concerned. “But I can see that you really want this to work. And I’m sure they’ll see that as well. Everything else will have to come with time.”

“Will you come as well?” Sirius blurted out his question like he was unable to keep it in any longer.

“I’ll have to ask Marvolo if I can come or if he has other plans. You know by then the adoption might be finished. And…” Harry hesitated because he felt conflicted. “I really want to spend my holidays with you. But if Marcus already is adopted, he’ll be at Griffin House… and well, as his big brother, I would like to be there.”

Sirius smiled. It was a sad smile, but there was pride too. “You’ll be a great big brother. A better one than I was.”

Now Harry was sad too. “I’ll do my best.”
They met in a small park near the village where Fleur’s family had their home. The letter with the first invitation had mentioned Lord Slytherin’s wish to ask for a second opinion on something he was working on. Bill was pretty sure the man had been talking about the ritual to remove a horcrux safely from a living being and had answered promptly to make an appointment.

After a few letters back and forth, while also preparing for the examination of the small Black summer house, they had agreed on meeting in France on this very day.

Bill was the first to arrive at the bench, settling down after casting an area heating charm to have his lunch break here. It probably wouldn’t take Lord Slytherin long to make an appearance.

The curse-breaker had finished his first sandwich when he heard the sound of purposeful strides along the gravel path and looked up. He guessed he shouldn’t really be surprised that Lord Slytherin was able to blend in well with the muggle fashion. The story of his childhood in an orphanage in the middle of muggle London made a regular appearance in the newspapers – practically every time the man was mentioned more than in passing – and consequently in the usual workplace gossip. But he allowed himself to feel a little surprised by how well the wizard born in the twenties was able to blend into modern fashion.

“Do I have something on my face?” Slytherin asked once he was near enough to do so without resorting to yelling. “Or did I manage to dribble honey down my shirt?”

“No,” Bill managed to answer after he had taken a moment to gather himself. “I just wouldn’t think… seeing you in a jumper over a shirt and simple slacks… I have to confess to being surprised.”

At this Lord Slytherin laughed, before sitting down on the bench next to the eldest Weasley son. “You wrote to dress appropriately for a muggle setting. And considering the weather in the south of France, I didn’t want to go with a more formal mode of dress.”

With a casual flip of the man’s wrist he held his pale wand in hand – it must still fit him well if the man had chosen to use a wand so infamous that many recognised it by sight – and started to draw runes into the air, creating privacy wards which would disperse the moment they both chose to leave.

Without any preamble Lord Slytherin reached into his trouser pocket retrieving a shrunken scroll. “As the next good day for a major magical ritual nears, I wanted to ask for your opinion on my revised version of the ritual I had attempted this last Yule.” The older wizard held out the small scroll to Bill, who took it with a hand that, thankfully wasn’t shaking. “The last attempt didn’t harm the original container, but I had difficulties finishing it the way I had planned to do, and when I attempt to remove the horcrux from my son’s body, such isn’t tolerable. I have included my attempt at a recording of that ritual, and what I think I got wrong.” Bill started to turn the scroll over in his hands, uncertain if he should put it away or get out his wand to unshrink and read it.

A smirk curled the corners of Lord Slytherin’s mouth. “Go ahead. I have plenty of time. In fact, I would like to speak with you about your task to clean up an old Black property, if you need more time before we can discuss my ritual design.”

Too curious to withstand temptation, Bill got out his wand and started casting the charm to reverse the shrinking on the spot. The scroll consisted of several pieces of parchment all bound together by
a tie of green silk. “I always had the impression that a Lord hasn’t much time so close to a
Wizengamot session.” It wasn’t really a subtle attempt to fish for more information, but Bill didn’t
delude himself into thinking that he was able to match Lord Slytherin at something so essentially
slytherin as fishing for information.

He got a snort and a look clearly communicating that his attempt had been much too transparent in
response, but Lord Slytherin chose to explain himself anyway. “Today the test required in the
adoption process of Marcus will take place. Maybe it has already started. I’m trying to distract
myself.”

Bill hummed. “In that case, I’m sure we’ll manage to fill more than my lunch break with
something to distract you, Lord Slytherin.” With careful hands Bill unfurled the roll, sorting
through the different pieces of parchment filled with the flowing cursive of a person well versed
with a quill. “Do you feel up to removing some failing charm work and pests from an old house
which has stood empty for far too long?”

Now it was Lord Slytherin humming in thought. “No curses? How unusual for a house owned by
the Black family.”

“ Mostly there are charms and wards too long unmaintained which once were meant to keep too-
nosey children out of dangerous areas, now going to become lethal soon. There's even runework
distorted by magical pests nibbling at the wood it was carved into. I have no idea what that has
become now, but it feels much too sentient to approach without proper backup.”

“That sounds interesting, and as if it could be able to keep my interest for a while,” Lord Slytherin
conceded, relaxing into the bench, stretching his legs out before him.

“We’ll see how long this takes,” Bill said before diving into the description of the ritual attempted
last Yule. It really was written down with each detail there, even with references to the parts acting
somewhat in parallel but at the same time in opposition to the parts of the ritual needed to perform
in the creation of a horcrux. It truly was an eerie text to read.

Bill furrowed his brow. “Why not try to prevent the pain this will inflict on the one doing the
moving? Isn’t that the part more likely to disrupt the working?”

A humm of agreement was to be heard from the side, and Bill turned his head in confusion. “I
think there actually is a way to prevent the pain. But I’m not willing to pay that price.” A pale,
slender hand moved to point to a few rune clusters around the incredibly complex circle of the
older version of the ritual. “See here? Pain can only be prevented if the soul doesn’t return to its
original place. All those runes making certain the soul piece can be removed from the living
container without harm to that container, also make certain it returns post haste to where it
belongs.” Without prompting Bill moved the newer version of the rune circle to the top. “I added in
a delay, among other things, in the hope that it’ll make certain I can finish the parts keeping Harry
safe before the pain will consume me.”

Bill was pretty sure he knew what the price Lord Slytherin no longer was willing to pay was. And
he was glad that murder to prevent his own pain wasn’t on the list of options any longer for the
man. So he bent down over the drawing of a circle, studying the intricate markings constructing
something similar to a time-delayed cage between the place where the container was to be placed
and the mark where the one conducting the ritual would sit.

“Have you contemplated including another person in the ritual? Kind of a guide? Someone who
would do the working and not endure the pain?” It would remove the risk of interrupting the ritual
because the one conducting it would be reunited with a part of their soul.
“And whom would I ask to do so? There aren’t many who know of this that are capable, and have my trust.” There was a challenge in the man’s blue eyes, but Bill wasn’t a young foolish Gryffindor anymore. That wasn’t a challenge he would accept. So he only nodded in agreement. This really wasn’t a task to be given to just anyone. “Have you heard of the Mongolian custom of using a charged stone in place of a participant in a ritual? It might make it easier to create the delay you’re going for.”

After that it wasn’t hard at all to fill the afternoon with interesting discussion, and once they had exhausted that topic, Lord Slytherin actually decided to come help Bill with cleaning up some failing charms in an old house.

Hearing a lot of interesting gossip about people no longer living while cleaning out an old house made the whole experience much more interesting.

oooOOooo

Marten smiled once he had finished setting everything up in the room the school was providing for this testing session. A few people from the Ministry were still not there to witness the test, and the teacher who had gone to retrieve the boy who was about to be tested wasn’t back yet either.

But he was happy with the design he had come up with for the test. The biggest problem hadn’t been finding a task for the boy to do, but to find something that others would accept as proof that the child had relayed information to the snake. Some of his first ideas could have been interpreted as a snake acting as any snake would do over the snake acting on the whim of a child.

And he wasn’t willing to risk that. The boy would be better off growing up with people who wouldn’t look at him oddly because he hissed at snakes.

Checking one last time that the scent and heat shielding charms on the basket filled with rodents and the maze with only one rat bound to one end were working fine, Marten settled down on his chair to wait.

Luckily he didn't have to wait long.

“And here we are.” Lord Lestrange came in, leading a group of other Wizengamot members, closely followed by the teacher and a small boy. The child – who by all accounts had to be Marcus – seemed excited and a little nervous. Something that seemed pretty reasonable to be in this situation.

Mrs. Wisby was the last to enter and close the door, gesturing for him to start.

“Good day, Marcus, Lords.” Marten nodded in their direction but only smiled for the small child, giving him a wink. “I’ll explain how this will work to Marcus in a moment and want you all to listen closely and to ask any questions after I’m finished and Marcus is sure he has a good understanding what his part in this is going to be. Everyone in agreement?”

Before one of the surly-looking Lords was able to answer, Lord Lestrange nodded decisively. “Sounds straightforward, Mr. Singer. Please proceed.”

Marten took a few steps forward, resting his hands on the boy’s shoulders, and turning him so that he was facing to the labyrinth Marten had spent some time setting up.
“This is the task I have set for a snake to master, Marcus. I want you to help my snake go to the chamber at the end where no rat or mouse is sitting. When it reaches that, I will give it a bunny to feed on. But you need to explain that it will get bigger prey if it goes to where there is no prey at the moment.” Hopefully the fact that going to where no prey was to be found would be against a snake’s instincts would be enough to convince the people who were hoping the test would fail.

“Is your snake a boy or a girl?” Marcus asked, tilting his head to the side like an inquisitive dog.

“A girl.” Marten answered, smiling. That boy truly was an interesting child.

“And if she goes to where no prey waits, she will get something truly good?” Marten nodded, encouraging the boy to keep asking questions. “So she can ask for something she wishes? Like I ask Marvolo for chocolate frogs, because I like them so much?”

Marten thought that might work even better. “Exactly like that, Marcus. Now let me ask if the others over there have understood as well, and then we can start.” He turned to the Wizengamot members and could see some resentment in a few faces, but no one insisted on asking questions, so he directed Marcus to stand on a small step-stool near the start of the maze.

After checking that the entrance to the actual maze was still closed, Marten walked over to the basket holding one of his own prized pet snakes. Before he dared to open the basket, he slipped on the thin leather gloves he always wore when handling his snakes. This one wasn’t venomous, but a bite would still hurt. A lot.

“This is Sanza. Can you explain the task to her, Marcus?” With practiced ease Marten opened the basket and took out the snake, turning so the boy would be able to see the young boa constrictor.

With a happy smile the boy nodded and promptly started to hiss. It was a peculiar sound, and that the snake was moving but didn’t make a sound herself was most peculiar as well. Of course Marten knew that most snakes weren’t able to make much noise, with exceptions like the rattlesnakes, but seeing it so clearly demonstrated was something else.

Sanza was lowered into the area marking the start of the maze, onto the wood chips and dirt he had covered the ground with, but moved the whole time so her head was pointing at the boy, angled so that one of her eyes was focused on the child. Or that was what Marten assumed was happening.

He moved his wand into his hand, ignoring the murmurs originating with the old men near the doors, his attention solely focused on the small child hissing animatedly to the snake, pausing again and again as if he was waiting to get an answer.

It certainly was a strange thing to watch.

“She’s ready,” Marcus suddenly announced, the excitement almost tangible in the air around him.

And it looked like Sanza was ready, the snake now posed with her head right next to where a sheet of glass separated her from the actual maze. “Good, then I’ll open the maze now,” Marten agreed with a smile, casting a silent levitating spell at the barrier, opening up the door.

With awe – and a few mutterings behind Marten that sounded suspiciously like swearing – they all watched how fast a snake could move if properly motivated. And just as he had hoped when he had designed this maze, Sanza was moving through the parts of the maze not drenched in the smells of prey, but along those leading to the place where no prey was waiting.

It didn’t take more than a minute for the snake to reach the end of the maze, where she turned to look over to Marcus, who smiled so broad a smile that he looked a little lunatic. Marten was almost
sure that there was a conversation happening again, with really short bursts of hissing from the boy.

“She’d like to have a baby rabbit. She solved the maze right, didn’t she?” The way confidence so quickly switched to worry saddened Marten a bit, but he was happy to nod and smile in hopes that this would reassure the child.

“She did very well. And she can have a baby rabbit. Give me just one moment.” Marcus paid a lot more attention to how Marten caught a small rabbit for the snake and how Sanza then proceeded to capture the rabbit and swallow it whole than he did to the conversation between all the adults who had been waiting at the door.

By the look of it the test had been enough for Mrs. Wisby to be sure that Marcus was indeed a parselmouth, and that meant that the adoption was now able to move forward. Marten was happy for the kid, keeping watch as Marcus carefully stroked the bump in the snake's belly where her meal was now slowly being digested.

That had been fun and rather easy, with a little luck he and his shop would be mentioned in the Prophet in connection with this. It would be good publicity to have.

oooOOooo

Once again Harry made himself comfortable on his bed down in the Slytherin dungeons, holding the small charmed mirror in his hand and speaking with his adopted father. How much could change in a year. Stuffing another pillow behind his back, Harry listened as Marvolo explained his plans for another test with a revised ritual – Harry felt better the moment Marvolo told him that Bill had contributed to the new setup – that he was planning to use during the next appropriate day – which would be Ostara, or the spring equinox – to test if it was safe to use on Harry.

“I’m really not comfortable with the idea that you might get hurt during those experimental rituals, father.” Harry said once more, making a face just to be absolutely sure that Marvolo knew how happy Harry would be if this all wasn’t necessary.

“Sadly enough, there isn’t any hint at a ritual someone else might have created for this very purpose. So there’s no alternative to creating one myself, Harry. You know me well enough to realise that my work usually comes out the way I want it to.” Marvolo seemed certain enough, but due to the fact of what trouble Marvolo had managed to get into in the past, this declaration really wasn’t all that reassuring.

To Harry’s sceptical raised eyebrow Marvolo just chuckled. “I’m no longer a terrified teenager, Harry. Please, I promised to get my horcrux out of your scar. And I fear that I’m still not capable of the true remorse needed to absorb it the only other way that ever was described somewhere.”

Harry shrugged, aware of the fact that there probably wasn’t any way to get around that problem. “Do you know how the test went?” He might as well change the topic of their conversation if Marvolo insisted on being unreasonable about experimental rituals. In a way, Harry understood why many of them were banned. If one conducted one without guidance or a solid understanding, there was so much that could go wrong.

“Xerxes was here an hour ago. He said it went well. But we’ll have to wait for the official result.
from the Ministry before we can go on with the process,” Marvolo answered, smiling.

“So by the spring holidays Marcus will be part of our family? Or do you reckon it’ll take longer?”

Marvolo tilted his head to the side, waves of hair falling into the red eyes. “I guess it’s possible that the adoption could be finished by then. If I’m to test the revised ritual, I probably should arrange for you two to have a…” a smirk appeared on Marvolo’s face, making Harry apprehensive about what the wizard might be planning, “babysitter arranged. Don’t you think?”

A babysitter? He was almost sixteen! He didn’t need a babysitter. The glare Harry sent at the mirror should have been able to melt it, but it only made Marvolo laugh so hard, he had to lower his hand, giving Harry a good view of the ceiling in the room Marvolo was using. “I’m old enough. I don’t need a babysitter. Really, father!” Harry was glad he sounded more indignant than whining. Because whining as Draco was prone to do wouldn’t have worked well to support his case.

After a while Marvolo sat back up, his face moving back into focus, tears of mirth having left their traces on his face. “I don’t know when I last laughed like that,” Marvolo mused before giving Harry a warm smile. “You certainly are old enough to stay alone for a while. But if Marcus is living with us by then… I think it’ll be better to have someone there who is legally an adult and has permission to use magic if needed. Don’t you think?”

Feeling his glare only slightly dimming, Harry nodded slowly. That was a good reason. Remembering a discussion he'd had not so long ago, Harry contemplated if that was something that might work.

“I can see you plotting from here, Harry,” Marvolo cheerfully declared, clearly in a much better mood than usual.

Harry simply nodded. He wasn’t exactly plotting, per se, but he was contemplating a plan that would give him two things he wanted at the same time. “Sirius invited me to spend time with him and his daughters – and maybe their mother, he doesn’t know yet – at his house in France during the spring holidays. Maybe Marcus can come with me, and we do that while you test that ritual?”

A thoughtful look on his face, Marvolo appeared to be giving this idea serious thought when there was the sound of something, or someone, tapping on the glass of a window.

“What’s that?” Harry just had to ask, falling silent when Marvolo waved at him and turned his attention away from the mirror.

“There’s a kind of stork at the window.” Marvolo sounded puzzled. “Who would send me mail with a stork?”

“No idea.” Harry answered truthfully, turning the conversation back to the topic he was more interested in at that moment. “Will you consider my request?”

“I’ll certainly think on it. And maybe ask Madame Goyle. I’m not sure what kind of reassurance Marcus might need once the adoption is finalised. But I’ll let you know in time.” The tapping sounds got more insistent with each passing moment. “Sorry to cut our call short, son. But I have to see what that bird wants. Have a good night and pleasant dreams.”

“Sweet dreams to you too, father.” Harry answered with a smile and a hint of curiosity in his voice. But he knew better than to ask. There always was the possibility of letters sent in the middle of the night he would be better off not knowing about.

Harry retreated to his bed with a book Luna had recommended, to read a while before going to
sleep, his thoughts returning again and again to that curious messenger bird and the prospect of soon being a big brother.

Chapter End Notes

I already was accused of writing a mean cliffy here. But somehow it fit :D

Recommendation: The series “Of a Linear Circle” by flamethrower which can be found at AO3. A lot of great story, Founders time and time travel.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published on the 16th of November 2018
Next chapter planned for 30th of November 2018
So many people have linked the stork to the babies being delivered. :D I hadn’t expected that. And it got me thinking. Do any of you know of another animal linked to babies the same way the stork is? I know that it’s a pretty common image all over Europe, North America, and a lot of places where the British had significant influence at some time. I would love to learn of other baby delivering animals.

Not yet beta-read ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thursday, 22nd of February 1996

The letter was written on something different than parchment. It could be very well made papyrus, almost of the smooth quality of good paper. But the material it was written on wasn’t more puzzling than the words written.

Greetings,

I have thought long on how to start this letter and couldn’t decide on a way to address you. It’s hard to break habits of a lifetime but I’m sure you won’t appreciate my use of the name given to you by your mother. After deliberating some more I decided simply avoiding any use of names probably would be the best.

A few days ago I had an unexpected visitor. He seemed rather fixated on fighting evil and at the same time seeing it everywhere. I have sent letters like this to a few individuals I feel need to know this and can be of assistance in getting the situation under control.

As the visitor’s grief over one killed by a Death Eater seems to be the main cause for the fixation and questionable behaviour I thought it reasonable to send a warning to you. But at the same time I’m not confident in my own ability to judge the situation, so I decided to leave the name out. Please take the necessary precautions for your family’s safety.

Regards,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

The stork had left the moment Marvolo had collected the letter, and now the wizard was slumped in his chair thinking quickly. Before he could try to decipher that letter Marvolo had to put aside the ridiculous notion that had sprung to mind the moment he had seen a stork had delivered the letter. Considering the typical stereotypes, Marvolo had wondered for a single moment who had had the grand idea to use a stork to deliver news on an adoption. It certainly hadn’t been that way
when he had adopted Harry. Now that he had read the letter it was clear as day that his thoughts
had gotten away from him. Even as he could see Mrs. Wisby deciding to add a bit of whimsy to the
proceedings.

He had heard that Dumbledore was now living in a specialised clinic in Egypt, and storks were
known to flew back and forth between Africa and northern Europe each year to spend summer and
winter in the best climate they could find. It was curious that Dumbledore would select a stork to
deliver his message but not out of the realm of possibilities.

It felt surreal that Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, the professor in his ridiculous suit
who had set Marvolo’s cupboard on fire as a questionable attempt to discipline the young wizard he
had found there in the orphanage, would sent a warning. Not a warning to desist acting in a certain
way, or to follow his dreams, or something other related to things Marvolo himself was doing. No!
A warning of a danger – if real or not wasn’t really the point at the moment – to him and those he
cared for.

That the infuriating man had decided to keep the name to himself was only another irritating piece
of the puzzle Marvolo was now determined to work out.

“Flimm!” Marvolo stood and called for the elf. He needed some tea to stay alert enough to comb
the letter for any clues hidden in the text and then make a plan on how to get more information.
For instance it should be easy enough to get information on who travelled to Egypt in the last two
weeks, as most wizards and witches – and who else even knew enough to hate him – preferred to
travel such long distances by portkey, and few had the ability to make one for themselves. So the
Ministry registry should have the information Marvolo needed.

Flimm popped into the room, his toga fashioned from a white linen tea towel, Marvolo didn’t
manage to pass out his request for tea and fruit tarts before the elf bowed and started to speak.
“Mr. Potions Master is here for Master Marvolo. Flimm shall bring Mr. Potions Master in?”

Severus was here? “Bring him here. And then bring tea and snacks for two, Flimm.” Before he
could get out a few words of thanks – since he had learned what a loyal house-elf was capable of
doing, it had gotten a lot easier following Harry’s example – the elf was gone. So Marvolo tidied
up his desk before sitting down in his chair behind it.

The moment he was finished the door opened and Severus stepped into the room, walking around
the bowing elf, only to go down on one knee the moment he was clear of the door. “My Lord.”

Severus always had a way to make this gesture of deference look so smooth and effortless, with
his long dark robes pooling around his kneeling figure, his hair swinging gracefully with the
motion. In the past he had loved to see someone as knowledgeable bow to him, and how Severus
did so more gracefully than some of the oh so pure wizards from old families. But now – even as
the gracefulness remained – the joy was gone. “Severus, come sit down with me. How do you like
your tea?”

Barely showing a hint of confusion Severus stood, took the few steps to the chair Marvolo had
indicated, and answered with a polite incline of his head. “Heavy on the cream and only one sugar,
please. I hope to sleep tonight.”

Marvolo smiled and set about preparing the tea to Severus’ specification, levitating cream pitcher
and sugar cubes without touching his wand. Some of his classmates had sneered at the unworthy
use of wandless magic – equating what Marvolo had been able to do with the lowly work of the
house-elves they had at home – but it had proven to be a remarkable tool to refine one’s control
over the magic, so Marvolo did use it as often as possible.
“What brings you here on a school night, Severus?” Marvolo asked as the finished cup of pale tea floated, directed by his magic, over to his Potions Master. The moment Severus had accepted his cup, Marvolo started on preparing his own.

“A stork delivered a piece of interesting mail to me this evening, my Lord. I thought it wise to share it with you.” The younger wizard was composed as always, sipping at his tea.

“A stork?” Marvolo smirked stirring his tea so the sugar would have an easier time dissolving. “That sounds familiar. What had Albus to tell you?” That was interesting. Did Dumbledore send that letter to even more people? Or would the information differ?

Severus carefully placed his cup and saucer on the desk, getting out a rolled up piece of papyrus from one pocket in his robes. “He wrote to me that Amos Diggory visited him and seemed not entirely stable. As he knows of my vow to protect your son, he thought it prudent to give me warning that there might be danger directed at the boy from Diggory’s direction. He doesn’t sound that confident in his observation, though.” Severus held out the scroll for Marvolo to take. An offer he gladly accepted.

The next few moments were spent in silence, Severus drinking his tea and Marvolo reading the letter, searching for hidden meaning and comparing it – the wording, handwriting, length, offered information – to the letter he himself had received.

Aside from the name of the visitor, Severus’ letter held a lot of my boys and idle chatter that Marvolo really was glad were missing from his letter. It seemed to be true that Dumbledore wasn’t capable of treating students he had seen go through the halls of Hogwarts in his tenure as professor and headmaster as adults once they had graduated. He certainly hadn’t appreciated the task of being a spy close to that man as much as he should have. Being treated as a child for all this time would have driven him insane. Severus had a lot more patience than people gave him credit for.

“Thank you, Severus. To my surprise, the letter he sent you only has one piece of information the shorter one he sent me lacked. So Amos Diggory is the one making Albus Dumbledore uneasy enough that he resorts to writing a letter to warn a man he regarded as a sworn enemy for so long.” Furrowing his brow in thought, Marvolo re-rolled the letter and handed it back to Severus. If the man really was that unstable, it was a lot more likely that he really was the one who had supported Dolores Umbridge in messing up the adoption process and posing opposition to all the law changes Marvolo had pushed for in regards to werewolves.

“I have thought about the need to adjust security measures for your heir, my Lord,” Severus said, stashing away the letter in one of his hidden robe pockets. “And beside making sure he doesn’t leave the castle alone and maybe resuming guards during outings to Hogsmeade, I feel he should be safe enough while at school.”

“Diggory has good reason to work towards revenge, and connections within the Ministry. I’m not sure I feel all that comfortable letting Harry roam the school on his own.” It was suspiciously easy to admit his worry to Severus. Madame Goyle’s assurance that it was normal to feel worry over a human close to oneself, and the need to share that burden with others, came to mind briefly, but he dismissed it in favour of concentrating on the conversation at hand.

“Since your son has been re-sorted, he is never truly on his own after classes. He's part of more than one study group, as far as I know, and spends a lot of his time studying in the common room or the library. It's his OWL year, after all, and he seems more dedicated to his studies than I have ever seen before.”

Marvolo hummed, by all accounts Harry hadn’t really strived to gain academic knowledge before.
It had been obvious that this had changed the moment there had been an adult caring about his grades. “So you think there's nothing more to do than let Harry know that there is danger and where it might come from?”

Severus nodded, but Marvolo didn't let him go until they had discussed possible ways to harm Harry while at school or ways to get him out from the wards around the school. Severus looked worn by the time he rose to leave. “Please convey my sincere apology to your wife for keeping you so long.”

Severus left with a smirk on his face, slowly shaking his head.

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Friday, 23rd of February 1996

It was Friday morning, the last workday of his week, and currently all there was to do was writing a few reports. It looked like he would be able to go home early. Kingsley really would like to do that. He loved his job, and the last weeks hadn’t been all that stressful. But he had plans for this evening – a visit to a cinema and then a club – and could use the extra time.

Setting down his fresh cup of coffee on his desk in his cubicle next to the roll of parchment of the report he had finished before going to the restroom, he prepared to start on the next report and sat down. With a sigh Kingsley cast a spell on the spoon to keep stirring the coffee so that the sugar would dissolve and the coffee cool a little before he took a drink.

“What do you want?” Kingsley said to the wizard suddenly standing next to him with less malice than the words implied. “Is there something important?” He turned to look up to where his more or less official partner was standing, a smirk on his face.

Dawlish laughed. “Sorry to be a bother, but Scrimgeour wants to see us. I saw Madame Bones entering his office a short time before he came to ask me to get you and come into his office.”

Kingsley felt one of his brows creeping up his forehead. Madame Bones went to talk with the Head of the Auror Department and just after that the two Aurors suspected to be part of two opposing political organisations – if he was generous with the definition of that – working together were asked to speak with their boss. If this wasn’t more than coincidence, Kingsley was a niffler.

With a sigh Kingsley placed his quill down, closed the inkwell, let the report fall closed, and stood. “Any ideas what this is about?”

“Could be about the real culprit behind the whole adoption mess? Or something totally unrelated? I’ve no idea.” Dawlish shook his head, and Kingsley nodded. As sure as he was – even though he still had no proof of any kind that would hold up in court – that the other was a Death Eater, Kingsley trusted his partner. When it came to work they had found that they agreed on a lot of things, if not on all. If Dawlish had had any idea what this was about, he would have shared.

Together they walked over to the Head Auror’s office, many of their colleagues looking up from their work or chatter to watch them walking by. It didn’t take long for them to reach the office and to step through the door, closing it behind them, instantly muffling all sound from the bigger office
“Shacklebolt, Dawlish, thank you for being prompt. Madame Bones has received an interesting letter with a warning that we need to investigate. But please take a seat.” The Head Auror waved his hand towards the seating group near the fireplace and they all moved to sit down. Madame Bones looked as if she were chewing on something, but sat down and left the explanations to Scrimgeour.

“Dumbledore claimed in his letter, one of a group he said, that Amos Diggory did visit him to complain over Dumbledore stopping his fight against evil.” Kingsley had trouble believing this. Albus never had been someone to share information freely without need. It had been frustrating from time to time while the Order still held meetings. “While he himself wrote that he doesn’t feel all that secure in his deduction,” Dawlish snorted, and as much as Kingsley would have liked to disagree, he had to work hard not to roll his eyes in disbelief, “The fact that Amos’ son was killed at the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and ever since then Amos has blamed Death Eaters and later Lord Slytherin for his loss, lends some credence to the old Headmaster’s claims.”

That would be a good enough reason to at least investigate a bit. Kingsley nodded, because he knew fighting evil was a tricky business. It was really hard to see if someone was acting out of genuine fear, carelessness, ignorance, the need to defend, or actual evil intentions. It was too easy to define everything that one didn’t like – for whatever reason – as evil.

“You have proven yourselves as a team capable of handling delicate political situations well.” Madame Bones suddenly spoke up from where she was sitting, hands folded in her lap. “So I asked Rufus to assign you two as a team on this task. We need to make sure that Amos Diggory isn’t readying himself to attack someone,” Kingsley was pretty sure they all were thinking of the same probable target in that very moment, “or acting in any other way against the law.”

“So he hasn’t committed any crimes until now?” Dawlish wanted to know, leaning forward in his armchair.

“Not that we know of,” Madame Bones answered in a manner that seemed to indicate her suspecting something she either had no proof for, or that wasn’t a crime in the true sense of the word. She might know of some political actions that Diggory had attempted that she didn’t approve of.

“Good. So it’s more an undercover operation?” Dawlish seemed genuinely interested to take on this task, and Kingsley wasn’t really reluctant either. The Order might have disbanded once it had sunken in that there wasn’t any opposition that they needed to fight behind the scenes, as it were, but Kingsley still was dedicated to protecting their world from another war.

“That’s correct.” Scrimgeour confirmed.

After that they got to read the letter Madame Bones had received before being sent off to plan their approach to monitoring Amos Diggory and his actions without setting off a political avalanche by accident.

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Saturday, 24th of February 1996
It was a sunny morning, and the students were all walking down from the castle to the Quidditch field. The air was filled with laughter and the sound of many people talking. It was even louder than when everyone was on the way to the village. After all, the younger years were here as well.

Harry was walking next to Luna, a silly grin on his face, and her hand in his. She was almost skipping alongside him, outfitted with a hat and scarf in Ravenclaw Team colours. Harry was wearing a similar getup, except that his hat and scarf were mostly green with snakes in silver. Today’s game was between Slytherin and Ravenclaw, and everyone was anticipating an exciting time.

“Who will win? What do you think, Harry?” Ron wanted to know. He and Hermione, as well as Neville, were walking with the mixed group of students.

Harry turned so he could see Ron. “I have no idea who will win, Ron. I know our team is good. But Ravenclaw is a good team as well. As far as I can see, we’re looking forward to an exciting match!”

“And where do you want to sit?” Theo asked, a glint of mischief in his eyes. Harry grinned in his friend’s direction, rolling his eyes. It seemed that teasing your friends about their relationships was a universal pastime of teenagers. Harry had seen it happen up in Gryffindor tower and down in the Slytherin dungeons.

“We’ve talked about it and decided to sit with the Gryffindors today,” Luna answered in her dreamy voice, not turning to look at Theo or any of the others. “There we can cheer for both teams without stepping on too many toes.”

That theory resulted in a lot of laughter and Harry had to grin. Cheering for Slytherin while sitting among the students from Gryffindor would be stepping on a lot of toes. But he was sure Luna had known that before suggesting they sit with the Gryffindors. “Sitting with one of the Houses not participating only leaves Hufflepuff and Gryffindor to choose from. And I simply have more friends in Gryffindor!” Harry once again rolled his eyes at his Slytherin friends, knowing exactly why some of them suddenly were so interested in where he was at all times.

People out to get him always had been a bother. But with a protective and influential parent, the irritation caused by people coming after him had increased. Marvolo didn’t brush off the danger, but made sure all his followers informed their children – or at least those still going to school at Hogwarts – to keep an eye out for Harry.

It was nice – somehow – and infuriating at the same time. Harry was really capable of defending himself. And he certainly knew of the dangers of portkeys by now, he wouldn’t just grab something handed to him by someone he didn’t know, for instance. And the way the antagonistic seventh-years acted around him now was proof that his duelling wasn’t all that bad either.

Theo nodded and grinned. “A snake and an eagle among the lions. Any objections to me tagging along?”

Harry rolled his eyes again. “I certainly won’t curb your adventurous tendencies. You have too few of them anyway.” Really, Theo didn’t even try to hide his plan to protect Harry’s back. Then Harry noticed Ron’s surprised expression and had to concede that this plot may not be as noticeable at first glance as Harry had thought.

They reached the stands and split. Daphne, her sister Astoria, Millicent, Pansy, all the little first-
years – they themselves hadn’t been that small, surely – and the whole of seventh-year Slytherin split away to go up to their section of the stands. The Hufflepuffs went around the stadium to reach the stairs to their stands, as did the Ravenclaws. Harry had his hand tightly clasped around Luna’s, as they and his friends turned right and started ascending the stairs.

The climb wasn’t all that long, with them all traipsing up and down the many staircases of the castle on a daily basis, but it was still demanding enough that the chatter grew quieter for awhile.

They ended up with Harry seated next to Luna in the middle of the rows. Ginny sat down next to Theo with a “A Slytherin in the Gryffindor stands. How interesting!” instantly questioning him on his favourite team outside of school Quidditch. Ron sat down next to Lavender and her friend, while Hermione sat down on the other side of Luna, getting out a book filled with notes.

“How about you? What’s your favourite team?” Harry asked Hermione.

“Hermione!” Harry laughed incredulously. It was just like her to bring a book to Quidditch.

“Why does she do that?” Ginny suddenly asked from behind Harry. “She does know that shadowing the other seeker is a shoddy tactic, doesn’t she? If you’re better than the other, there’s no need to shadow them all the time. Seriously!”

“Just because you dislike that move doesn’t make it shoddy!” Theo argued, but Harry could hear the humour in his friend’s voice. “It might go against your Gryffindor sentiments, but as she has a slower broom, staying close to the opposing seeker can work out rather well. If she spots the snitch nearby, she won’t have to try to catch up to a much faster broom.”

In the meantime Draco used his tag-along to disrupt a few of the Ravenclaw chaser plays, eliciting a few boos from Luna and her fellow Ravens. Harry had taken to cheering. Cheering for good moves played by either team, earning himself a few funny looks from those sitting around them.

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Ginny snorted. “But if they both spot the snitch at a distance, Malfoy will outfly her before they reach it, even if she spots it first. I can’t see any advantage.”

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When a chaser managed to throw the quaffle through one of the hoops, Harry cheered. When one
of the keepers managed to save an attempt, Harry cheered. When one of the beaters managed to keep one of the bludgers from knocking a player off their course, Harry cheered.

It was a strangely freeing experience.

There was outrage when Gregory managed to hit a Ravenclaw chaser over the head with his beater’s bat. Harry wasn’t sure that had been on purpose, but he hadn’t had the best line of sight, so he shrugged and decided to accept whatever Madame Hooch said had happened. In the end it was the referee who decided stuff like that.

How did one get to be a Quidditch referee, anyway? Professional players were scouted off the school teams a lot of the time, or from smaller leagues all over the world. Even from pick-up games. Trainers often were former players getting too old to play, but now with lots of experience to pass on to the younger players. But how did one become a referee?

Chambers managed to score the penalty shot, giving Ravenclaw the lead by a good forty points, the biggest lead one of the teams had gained so far.

Draco made a corkscrew dive in an attempt to draw Cho Chang along – at least Harry was pretty sure that was the case – when the other seeker flew over Draco and turned in direction of the Hufflepuff stands, Harry knew that Draco had outwitted himself. Cho had seen the snitch. And Draco hadn’t even noticed yet.

That didn’t bode well for Slytherin.

Just moments later Cho had caught the snitch and the game was over.

Three quarters of the school broke out into frenetic cheering, and suddenly fireworks were flying through the air. Blue and copper sparks, small cartwheels, words spelling themselves in the middle of the air, figures of small ravens flying about. It was glorious. Harry turned in his seat, and saw the twins, Fred and George, in the last row, shooting off more and more of their fireworks.

Harry was about to turn around to watch the fireworks at work, as Luna suddenly leaned into his side, moved her face really close to his and kissed him.

For a moment Harry felt as if he had been hit by a petrificus totalus. He couldn’t move. Then he kissed back, unsure of what he was doing, but enthusiastic. When Luna moved back he felt light headed.

The moment he regained enough of his senses to notice what was happening around them he blushed. All the boys and a few of the girls near enough to have seen were calling out for them to kiss again.

He was surprised when Luna did follow those calls, initiating another kiss.

Now he understood why people spend so much time kissing. It was great.

ooOoo

“And then she kissed me. In front of the whole school!” Harry finished his retelling of the day’s game, blushing again. Marvolo chuckled but didn’t say anything. “Even those who hadn’t seen it
there knew by the time we all were back at the castle.” Harry felt like burrowing his head in the pillow behind him, or the one to his side. Maybe he would hide under his covers for the rest of the term.

When Marvolo had the audacity to grin, Harry shot him a dark look. “By all I know about Xenophilius Lovegood, he’s a decent man. Providing a platform for conspiracy theorists has thrown a light of suspicion on his publication, but what I have seen among the quite amusing theories are interesting documentations of folklore and almost forgotten knowledge.” Marvolo chuckled when Harry gave him an incredulous look.

“Did you send someone to gather information on the Lovegoods?” Harry wanted to know. Did Marvolo just call the Quibbler an interesting publication?

“Of course I did. He was shuffled forward in priority due to the fact that you’re interested in his daughter. Every Lord and Lady on the Wizengamot keeps close watch on people of interest. And every publisher is certainly on that list.” Harry had known that. It had been part of the lessons he had during the summer both from his grandfather’s portrait and Marvolo.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’m surprised that you haven’t heard of this already. I’m sure it’ll be in the papers in the morning.”

“Even if the children have sent mail directly afterwards. Owls need a while to fly that far – there aren’t many families living near Hogwarts – and then their parents would have to contact me.” Marvolo tilted his head and moved to sit a little bit straighter. “But I agree with your assessment that it’s likely for this to be the headline in tomorrow’s paper. Are you unhappy about the kiss?”

Harry huffed. Was he unhappy? “I don’t know. I mean, I liked the kiss. In fact it was great! But there in front of the whole school? I’m not so sure if I’m happy with that. It didn’t really think about it… but now, in hindsight? I think I would have preferred a more private place?”

“Did you speak with your godfather?” Marvolo asked, and Harry chuckled, seeing the uncertainty in the other’s ruby-red eyes. “We both know that I’m no expert in any kind of romantic interaction. Your godfather, on the other hand, could be named an expert, and certainly had a teenager’s time nearer the norm than I.”

Harry nodded. Marvolo had a point. “I spoke with Sirius before calling you. He said that it’s nice to have a girlfriend who knows what she wants. And that it would be all over the papers anyway, so getting it over with quick is better. Not sure if I agree.” And he really wasn’t sure.

Being a teenager was really confusing.

“Well, Madame Goyle tells me again and again that the teenage years are a time to explore. The world, interactions between people, one’s own self. All that.” Marvolo waved his hand to indicate a list of further options. “Speak with Miss Lovegood if you want to avoid further displays like the one of today. I hear it’s important to share and discuss such things to ensure a successful partnership.”

Now Harry had to chuckle. Mrs. Goyle really was a miracle worker with unending supplies of patience. “I’ll do that.” Harry yawned. “How goes the adoption process?”

Marvolo smirked, obviously pleased with himself. “It’s going well. I’ll get information on when it can get finalised soon. I plan on having an adoption ritual similar to what we did for Nott’s adopted son, Aiden. Are you willing to take part in that? I could arrange for you to have permission to leave the school grounds for the weekend. What do you think?”
Harry sat forward on his bed eagerly. “Of course I want to be part of the adoption! Marcus will be my little brother! I would be offended if you were to exclude me!” Harry tried to mock glare but had to yawn again.

“Go to bed, Harry. It’s late. And even when you sleep in, you’ll need all the rest you can get.” Marvolo smiled. “And I’ll make sure you can be there for the adoption ritual. No need to worry. And now go to sleep!”

“Sleep well, Father,” Harry said in agreement – he was rather tired – and spoke the command to close the connection. He already had changed into his pyjamas, and only had to quickly visit the bathroom before he could slip between the sheets on his bed.

It had been a good day, but he wasn’t looking forward to the morning papers.

Monday, 26th of February 1996

They all were mingling in the rooms and halls located near the Wizengamot’s chamber in their usual finery, talking – or as Marvolo thought to himself: gossiping – about the session starting soon, those who were not there yet, Quidditch results, social events, and other topics along those lines. Marvolo was pretty sure that people just out of his range of hearing were talking about this week’s edition of Witch Weekly. As Harry had suspected, the kiss at the Quidditch game between him and Luna Lovegood had been interesting enough to warrant a whole two page article. There had been pictures from the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and they had reused the rumours they had spread almost a year ago. About a love triangle between Miss Granger, Mr. Krum, and Harry. About the families of them both – obviously – and if two unmarried wizards were capable of providing two young students with the necessary guidance.

It had been useless drivel.

But it had been expected drivel, and just this side of avoiding slander. The fact that Harry also had reported from school that the students really weren’t reacting all that much had been enough in Marvolo’s eyes not to take some steps against the magazine.

While Marvolo listened in on Lucius and Severus discussing the ongoing dispute over cauldron thickness, material requirements, and how silly that squabble really was, as all high-quality equipment was bought outside of Britain more and more, he watched as a disturbance made its way through the crowd. It didn’t take long to become clear that the disturbance was Mrs. Wisby fighting her way through, politely using her elbows where needed, in search of someone.

“Ah, there you are, Lord Slytherin!” she shouted cheerily across the room the moment she spotted Marvolo. Waving for his attention, her attempts to clear a way through the groups between them became more ruthless.

That elbow looked pointy.

“I thought I’d come down here and inform you myself! Why send an owl out to fly through the city, when I know that you’ll be here today anyway?” She was as sunny as always, and Marvolo
felt himself starting to smile. There was only one message she would bring him with such an opening.

“The papers are finished and the adoption approved. You can come up after the session is finished. After you’ve signed everything, you’ll only need to arrange for a date when Marcus can move from the school to your home.” Feeling a little out of touch, Marvolo wondered if she ever was anything but cheerful. Then what she had said sank in fully and he used Occlumency to keep calm. “Can I expect you after the session, Lord Slytherin?”

With long practice Marvolo managed a smile which looked real enough to fool all but the best politicians. “If the session doesn’t run too long, I’ll come by your office before I leave for home.” Thankfully Harry already had decided that Marcus would get the room next to his, and Flimm had cleaned it and outfitted it with all new comforter, pillows, curtains, and other things a young boy would need in his room.

“That’s good. Just drop me an owl if you need to make other arrangements.” She patted his arm and was gone after a quick “Have a nice session, Lord Slytherin,” in his direction.

“She is something else,” Severus remarked drily. “Such a sunny disposition even after years working at the Ministry. Do you think she might have some pixie blood?”

Lucius snorted. “And her friendly demeanour is nothing more than a front to lure us into her trap? Or have I missed something about the nature of Cornish Pixies?”

Severus shook his head, smirking. “I don’t think you have, Lucius. But for all that they cause humans harm for fun. I never heard of a pixie being glum. Have you?”

Marvolo listened and watched as his two… friends kept bantering all through the rest of the wait, before the door opened and they all went into the hall. He wasn’t paying that much attention, though, as he went through all that needed to be done if he wanted to bring Marcus home sometime this week – maybe Friday would be best – and hold the adoption ceremony on Saturday. For one thing, he needed to make sure Harry could come home for the weekend. Then he needed to instruct Barty to write up and send out all the invitations, Flimm would have to clean the room once more, and prepare food for the adoption ceremony. Maybe they should hold that at the manor. It was possible that there would be a lot of people willing to come, he couldn’t very well send people away… His thoughts were racing, even as he was occluding heavily to keep calm and maintain a clear head.

He sat down on the silver bench with its snake legs, barely remembering the cushioning charm that was needed if he wanted to still feel his backside when the session finally would be over in a few hours. Pretty soon the usual aimless shouting matches, bickering, and disagreements started. Some topics had been discussed again and again over decades by now, and if no one stepped in, they were brought up again and again.

Today Marvolo had his mind elsewhere as the impending adoption was of greater importance than whether there was a need to limit the number of Quidditch teams one individual, or family, could own. That drew him out of his mad planning for a moment. It seemed there were rumours that the owner of the Falmouth Falcons was contemplating buying the Chudley Cannons. The possible disturbance of the balance of the league seemed to be a big concern.

Snorting, Marvolo returned to his inner musings. With Marcus moving in now, he would be there for the spring holidays and therefore during the time Marvolo had planned to use for the next test of his ritual. He furrowed his brow. He should step up the security measures. A healer on hand was all well and good, but he probably should also include a curse-breaker. Maybe Bill Weasley would
be willing to assist. He clearly was competent enough to be of help.

Maybe Harry’s wish to visit with his godfather could be used to have both boys out of the house during that day. Marvolo would have to ask Lord Black if he was willing to take care of more than one boy, one of them just about to turn six, for a few days while trying to get to know his own daughters?

There was no other way to know than to ask.

In the end the meeting was over a lot quicker than Marvolo had anticipated. But that was the way of things when one was planning life-changing events.

Deep in thought, and not in any danger here in the halls of the Ministry, Marvolo only had distracted greetings for his follower-friends – all of whom grinned knowingly – and walked in the direction of the lifts.

Before he could reach them he was called. “Marvolo! A moment please!”

Surprised, he turned. Not many women called him by his given name. And that voice had been from a woman, he was almost certain. Amelia Bones was quickly catching up to him, plum robes billowing around her legs. As it would be extremely rude to simply walk on – and he was curious – Marvolo waited where he stood for her to reach him.

Once she was within arms' reach, Marvolo gave a bow from his neck. “Madame Bones.”

She smiled, bemused, and then waved her hand. “Please call me Amelia. Don’t you think that’s more than reasonable by now?”

Well, that was a surprising move. But even though he might be the elder – technically – the fact that he had been declared newborn not even a year prior, and that when two people were close in age, it usually was the woman’s decision to offer the use of first names, it was a socially acceptable move.

He arched a brow. “Amelia then. But I think we should consider that this could give credence to the rumours that we might be courting.”

Rolling her eyes, Amelia shook her head. “We can’t prevent them from gossiping. But after we have fought together, on the same side, mind you, it would be odd to stand on formality.”

“I don’t have any reasonable objections. Amelia. But I doubt that this was the reason you wanted to speak with me.” He really wanted to go up to Mrs Wisby’s office to sign the papers, and then go home. He needed to inform Harry and start on all the preparations.

She gave a short nod, and her demeanour changed from easygoing to serious. “I received an interesting letter from Egypt. The content is concerning, and I have decided to relay a few of the warnings given.”

So Albus had sent the letter to Amelia as well. For the fraction of a second Marvolo wondered idly if that was the extent of the letters the former Headmaster had sent regarding his unexpected visitor.

Considering that there were still people lingering, Lords and Ladies gossiping or simply avoiding going home, Marvolo got his wand out and raised a quick silencing ward around them.

Now it was Amelia's’ turn to give him a questioning look. Without waiting for her question,
Marvolo started with his explanation. “I got a letter from the same place on Thursday evening. The warning inside was both pretty clear and explicit as well as vague. He didn’t mention any names. I guess your version was a little more informative?” He had suspected that Severus had received a version with the name, because the Potions Master was bound with a vow to protect Harry to the best of his abilities. It was only reasonable to assume that the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement rated even higher on the trust scale.

She nodded, folding her arms in front of her chest. “He did. And I already set our best team of Aurors on this. I’m pretty sure you’ll learn of it soon.” Her smirk was tiny, but there.

Marvolo gave an unapologetic shrug. “I can’t control what people tell me. So I already spoke with Harry about why we need to increase security once again. He is a remarkably patient teenager. Or so the parents I know assure me.”

Amelia chuckled. “I can’t say that Susan is all that patient most of the time. But your son has more reason than most to accept guards.”

A solemn mood came over Marvolo – all those emotions were hard to get used to – he was, or had been, one of the reasons for Harry’s acceptance of the need for guards and other forms of protection other teenagers didn’t have to bother about.

“When Marcus moves in at the end of the week, I’ll need to find a way to make a young boy understand why he can’t go wherever he wants without an adult at his side.” He had to speak with Xerxes regarding arrangements at the school.

Amelia had a gentle smile on her face, and it was reaching her eyes. “I don’t think he’s unaccustomed to the concept, Marvolo. He’s young. And congratulations on the adoption going forward.”

Marvolo inclined his head in acknowledgement. “Thank you. I promised Mrs. Wisby to drop by her office on my way home. She said just before the beginning of the session that the papers were ready.” His spirits lifted again. Hopefully the feelings he constantly had to deal with would stabilize once he absorbed the next part of his soul. He didn’t even dare to imagine what it might be like if the opposite were to happen.

“As you already know to be more careful, I don’t want to keep you any longer.” Amelia said, moving to the side so he had a clear path to the lifts.

“At the moment I plan to hold an adoption ceremony on next Saturday. I would feel honoured if you would consider attending, Amelia.” Some invitations should be delivered in person, and this was a prime opportunity to do just that.

For a moment the witch looked contemplative. “I don’t think that I have anything else planned for that day. Please send me an invitation by owl. Have a nice day!”

Chapter End Notes

The adoption made a jump forward I didn’t expect. But I think it fits rather well at this point. I guess it’s pretty obvious what a big part of the next chapter will be ;)

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
Chapter Notes

The long awaited adoption is here at last. Any guesses how many chapters it'll take until the summer? I’m not really sure, but I hope that after this I can jump a little forward in time so that we’ll reach the spring holidays soon. Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday, 26th of February 1996

Minerva sat in her office – she had started to consciously think of the circular office of the Headmistress as her office at the end of the last week – going through all the mail she had gotten over the weekend. The temporary transfiguration teachers who had stepped in to fill the post she no longer had time to manage by herself were doing well, but they needed a permanent professor for the next school year. And there also still was the matter of Head of Gryffindor, a position she still held at the moment.

That needed to be remedied before the next school year as well.

Maybe she shouldn’t try to fill both spots with the same person. In fact the arrangement with more than one teacher for a subject worked out rather well so far. If there wasn’t the problem of funding more teacher salaries, she really would like to hire an instructor for the younger years, at least for each of the core subjects.

And maybe there was a solution to the problems with funds without increasing the tuition fees.

She sighed, glancing over to the big ledgers she had spent a lot of time with since she had taken up the position of Headmistress in earnest.

It seemed that there were funds waiting that were tied to several conditions. After all the time the conditions hadn’t been met – they hadn’t been met well before Dippet became Headmaster – interest and ongoing donations had grown the pile of untapped potential money to quite staggering amounts.

Not all of the funds would be able to be released, as some of the conditions would require the school to break the current laws. Which handily explained why Albus hadn’t tried to tap into them. There simply wasn’t a way they could legally offer an introductory course into blood-based magics. So funds set aside for that and making interest – probably even getting a regular donation, but she would have to go to Gringotts to check if her suspicion was true – would stay untouched for ever. Or at least for a long time.

Minerva suspected that those magically enforced conditions had been put in place quite some time ago to ensure a diverse education of the magical youth. And so it had happened that the money had been abandoned rather than re-routed to other subjects once something had to be dropped from the curriculum.
She would need an adviser with more cunning and more experience with magically binding contracts to see if there was a way to unlock a few of those budgets. Maybe Severus would find some time over summer.

Before Minerva could get lost – again – in ruminations over how an *Introductory Course in the Performance of Seasonal Rituals* would or should look like, a shimmering patronus slithered through the wall of her office, paused before her desk and started to speak. “Good evening, Headmistress. I just arrived at the school’s gates and hope that you have some time to speak with me. I’ll make my way up to your office.”

The patronus dispersed and Minerva unconsciously sat up straighter. Tom Marvolo Riddle, or Lord Slytherin as he was called now, wanted to speak with her on a Monday evening? How curious. She knew there wasn’t anything wrong with Mr. Slytherin. In fact this year the son of Lily and James had flourished despite all the upheavals the poor boy had had to go through. His marks were better than ever. Not one of his teachers had complained about his class performance. Not even Severus, and the Potions Master had a tendency to find fault in the smallest of things if he wanted to. The boy had widened his circle of friends considerably, and even though his re-sorting had ended with him no longer on one of the Quidditch teams, he hadn’t stopped entirely.

Minerva wasn’t sure if all those positive changes had their roots in the fact that Harry had been adopted, and she was reluctant to attribute any of them to Lord Slytherin. But at the same time she couldn’t deny that he at least had been the small pebble causing the avalanche. He had been the one changing around Mr. Slytherin’s classes, organising mind-healing sessions for the child, providing a steady adult interest in the boy’s school performance and accomplishments.

The Dursleys certainly had been lacking in that respect.

And the changes in Severus since the summer. She had been worried when the young man had agreed to go back to his duties as a spy, now it seemed that there really was no reason to fear a war with Lord Voldemort as the leader of the opposing side.

Before she could sink further into her musings the wards alerted her to someone making their way up the stairs. That probably was Lord Slytherin.

With a few precise motions of her wand Minerva cleared her desk of anything that might be of interest to a visitor but wasn’t any of his business. She was just finished when a clear sound in her mind from the wards on her door – she would get used to thinking of this office as hers – and a knock on the same door alerted her to the visitor standing before it.

“Come in!”

And it was indeed Lord Slytherin, wearing his elaborate Wizengamot robes with the family crest under a heavy woollen cloak which was opened to accommodate the change in temperature between the outside and the castle. He came in, his hair a little windswept, closed the door and gave a polite nod of his head in greeting. “Headmistress. Thank you for giving me time to speak with you on such short notice.”

Minerva stayed seated, but nodded back in return, indicating one of the visitor chairs for her unexpected guest to sit in. “Call it feline curiosity and take a seat. You look hassled. I hope all is well? Do I need to call for your son?” It still felt strange to refer to Lily and James’ son that way, but she let that thought drop in favour of inspecting the young looking wizard taking a seat in the leftmost chair, draping his cloak over the backrest. He truly looked as if he had had a long day. Severus looked remarkably like this after a day teaching the younger years, or any of the
Gryffindor-Slytherin classes.

“No, if you’ll allow it, I want to visit with him in the common room after I have spoken to you. My news is better delivered in person.” The smile that looked so genuine on the handsome face told the story of happy news and not those tragic ones she had had to bring too many times to one of her students.

“Then what has brought you here this evening, Lord Slytherin?” Despite the fact that travel wasn’t all that hard for magical folk, most parents restrained themselves to only communicate via letter. That a parent came to the school was not a common occurrence.

“You may have heard that Harry and I have been working on getting approval to adopt a boy named Marcus, who shares our family gift, into our family. Today, rather unexpectedly, the adoption went through. So I’m here to inform Harry about the fact that he’s now an older brother. And I have come here to you specifically, Headmistress, to gain permission to take Harry out of school this coming weekend. I plan to make the adoption more officially than merely parchment forms filed with the Ministry. There will be a party, and Harry has expressed his desire to be there when this happens, whenever that might be.” Of course Minerva understood the implication of those plans, there would be a ritual held during or before that party. And she also agreed that Mr. Slytherin should be able to be there for the boy who would be his younger brother from now on. What shocked her, though, was the small smile on the face of Lord Slytherin. It even reached his dark blue eyes. The man was pleased, and not in the smug way she had so often seen on former Slytherins, but more like someone who had worked hard and finally reached the goal that had proven to be elusive before.

As there were no rules prohibiting parents from taking their children from school grounds on weekends for family celebrations – and the arrival, or maybe addition would work better in this instance, of a new child to a family certainly qualified – Minerva nodded. “I see no reason to deny your request, Lord Slytherin. Please organise a way of travel and the time he is to be back at school with your son’s Head of House.” She smiled and stood. “And please accept my congratulations on the growing of your family.”

The wizard across from her stood as well and firmly grasped her hand, shaking it. “Thank you, Headmistress. You should receive an invitation to the party in a few days. I’ll take my leave now to talk to my son and Professor Snape to make all the necessary arrangements. Good evening.”

With a flourish of putting his cloak back on, Lord Slytherin was gone and the door shut behind him.

Bemused, Minerva stared at the closed door for a moment longer, before shaking herself like a cat drenched by rain and returning to her work, searching for new members of staff. She was dreading the search for another Defence instructor.

ooOoo

“I need to get my broom checked over the spring holidays! There simply has something to be wrong with it! She never should have been able to fly faster than I!” Harry snorted at Draco’s whiny tone. And tilted his head sideways to get another angle on his drawing. Currently he was working on the drawing of a flitterbloom that he planned to animate to move like the plant regularly did.
“Stuff it, Harry!” Draco complained. “She only has a Comet 260, I have no idea what happened to my broom that she was faster.”

Harry looked up and ignored Draco – who was unusually flushed – in favour of turning towards Theo who was playing a game of chess against Daphne. “Is he always like this when something doesn’t go the way he thinks it should?”

Draco gave an indignant shout that was almost drowned out by the laughter from Theo, Daphne, and a few others in hearing range.

“He tends to be this way. But he’s at least better than he was in first year, when he almost constantly complained that you got to be on the team and he wasn’t allowed to.” Theo told with the air of someone sharing a big secret, but loud enough that everyone near the central fireplace could hear him.

More laughter followed and Draco flopped down on the two-seater next to Harry with a groan. “You’re a cruel bunch of evil teenagers. Why do I put up with you again?”

When no one answered to that and the room suddenly fell silent, Harry returned his attention to the room, and looked around to the door as everyone was staring at it.

There just inside the door into the common room that was closing again that very moment stood Marvolo, open cloak around his shoulders and a look of amusement on his face. “Good evening, everyone!”

Quickly closing his drawing pad, placing it in his book on sketch animating spells, and placing them on the near end table, Harry stood and quickly walked over to his father. There wasn’t much that would bring the man to Hogwarts on a school evening. The mirrors Marvolo had enchanted for them were simply working too well to make visits or even owls a necessity.

“It worked?” Harry asked when he was almost at his father’s side, eyes wide in hope.

“I signed the papers after the session this afternoon.” Marvolo nodded in answer, a big grin on his face.

Not thinking of what this would look like for the others, and too happy to even care, Harry took a last hasty step and enveloped the wizard before him in a big hug.

They had managed it! Marcus wouldn’t grow up feeling a burden, or unwanted. He would have a family. A bigger brother and a father who both cared. Harry was sure they would manage to give Marcus what they both had lacked for too long. They both knew what it was like to not have family, or reliable adults of any kind to care for them. Now they had a chance to make a difference for someone else.

After a few moments arms came up and around Harry, Marvolo returning the embrace. And so they stayed a moment until Harry’s senses caught up with him. Fighting a blush, Harry let his arms fall to his sides, feeling Marvolo do the same. He was painfully aware that everyone who had been staying at the common room was now looking at two of them and that there were a few more students here, probably fetched from the dorms by their friends.

.:Can you tell me more?:. Harry asked in parseltongue, leading Marvolo to a more secluded corner for a conversation.

They settled comfortably in two adjacent armchairs of dark green velvet. ..:Just before the session
started today, Mrs Wisby came to tell me that the papers were ready. I went up as soon as the
session was over:. Marvolo started, the happiness not vanishing from his face. ..I went to see the
Headmistress before coming here. She agreed to let you leave school this coming weekend.
I’ll have to hash out details with Severus, but that should be easy enough:.

Harry couldn’t stop himself from snorting, earning himself an eye roll from Marvolo. Harry
shrugged unapologetically. Severus Snape was a sworn follower of Marvolo’s. There was no
reason to assume that there would be any problem with Marvolo’s getting exactly what he wanted
from the man in situations just like this.

.. Barty is writing invitations to the party that will be sent out tomorrow. There will be an
announcement in the important newspapers about the adoption, of course. And I’ll have to
search for a ritual I vaguely remember. Not like the one we did for Aiden, but something
similar enough. Would you be willing to lay the rune circle if it’s not too complicated?..

Harry nodded with a silly grin on his face. ..Certainly:. He would be happy to have such a big role
in the adoption. With an announcement in the papers the news would be all over the school in no
time. ..Can I tell Sirius?:. Harry asked, certain that his godfather would wish to know of such a big
change in Harry’s life from Harry himself. ..Will Marcus get godparents?:.

For a moment Marvolo just sat there blinking and with an expression on his face that reminded
Harry of the time Dudley had run into the glass wall of the snake enclosure after the glass had re-
appeared behind him.

Before Harry could enquire if Marvolo was feeling well, the man quickly shook his head, and
nooded slowly. ..You may tell your godfather. Everyone will know tomorrow anyway. And
thanks for bringing a point to my attention I hadn’t thought about until now. He should get
godparents, shouldn’t he? I’ll have to think on that:. Marvolo smiled again and rose, picking up
his cloak as he did so. “Have a nice evening, Harry. I’m sure Severus will inform you of the
arrangements for Saturday morning once we have sorted them out.” They now were moving back
towards the main fireplace and the door to the common room, passing all the students trying, and
failing, to act normal and not show how nervous they were in the presence of Lord Slytherin and
his heir.

“I’ll be sure to keep in touch,” Harry said, following his father right up to the door. A little as if he
was escorting a visitor back to the door of his own house. And that picture might not even be that
far off from reality. “Have a nice evening, father.”

And he was gone. Probably to speak with Professor Snape and think about possible godparents.

The moment Harry turned back to the common room he was faced with a silent crowd of
Slytherins, all visibly curious, and only the students of fifth-year and up even attempting to hide
their true feelings.

Knowing that there was no way he would get even a moment of calm if he didn’t address the
hippogriff in the room, Harry took a few steps back to his usual seat in front of the main fireplace.
“Because I know you’re all dying of curiosity.” Harry grinned at his friends and Theo rolling his
eyes. “Father finished the paperwork on the adoption of Marcus, a young boy who is a distant
relative. It’ll be in the Prophet tomorrow, and there will be a party on Saturday. To get the
questions out of the way: I’m happy that I’ll be a big brother. Marcus is an intelligent kid. He loves
snakes. Currently he attends the new school Lord Lestrange has founded. I don’t think that you
need to know more.”
Murmurs started up again and the common room returned to its normal state on a Monday evening. The studious were finishing off homework given on that very day, the lazy were rushing to finish work given to them the week before and due the next day. Harry collected his drawing supplies and his book, smiled to his friends, and explained in a much lower voice. “Father just went to the professor to sort out the details of me leaving for home over the weekend. And because I don’t want my godfather to read about this in the mail I’ll contact him now. I’ll be back later.”

Theo nodded, Daphne smiled, the others gave only short sounds of acknowledgement, and Harry already was planning how best to present the facts and developments with Sirius.

oooOOooo

*Tuesday, 27th of February 1996*

As expected, the news of the adoption had made the front page of the Daily Prophet. Sighing in resignation – there simply was no way he could stop the press if he was going to use mostly legal means – Marvolo folded the newspaper, placed it to the side of the table, and turned towards the honey-sweetened pancakes on his plate.

Harry had brought up an important point yesterday that Marvolo hadn’t even considered until then. The need to name godparents for Marcus during, shortly before, or after the adoption ceremony on Saturday.

It simply was too important a tradition to name a set of responsible adults as possible guardians in dire circumstances, and as more people to have a guiding influence on the child growing up.

Usually friends of the parents were chosen. There just was no other explanation how Sirius Black ever could have been made godfather to Harry any other way. And more often than not, it was a witch and wizard who were not married or part of the same family.

Marcus didn’t have that, as far as they knew, because his mother hadn’t been able to choose, and the foster child system employed by the British government at this time didn’t choose either.

Marvolo briefly wondered if it would have made a difference for him if there had been a steady adult presence in his life beside the rather overworked and disinterested people at Wool’s. Shaking his head to get back on track – it didn’t matter as it was much too late now – Marvolo cut a piece from his breakfast and explored his possibilities in this while he carefully chewed.

There were a lot of Death Eaters he could appoint to this position. Whoever he picked would be pleased and see this honour as a big sign of his favour. Marvolo furrowed his brow in displeasure. That wouldn’t work well. He couldn’t deny that this position was one only given to those trusted to care for the child, but it shouldn’t be seen as a reward. So everyone who might interpret it that way was out of the running from the start. But it still left a few Death Eaters. Among them Lucius, Benjamin, Xerxes, and Severus. Could he get away with asking one of them in the eyes of the public? The fact that at least some of them had serious troubles with him – even if only in pretence – or had when he had come back, might stick out as odd to some people.

So maybe not Lucius who still maintained a rather overly polite if no longer frosty relationship with Marvolo in public. The others were options though.
A bigger problem was to find a witch he knew well enough and who could fill the position of godmother. He didn’t really know many witches. There was Augusta Longbottom whom he had to work with on and off as she was Harry’s regent for the Potter seat, and a member of the Wizengamot herself. Then there was Amelia Bones who seemed determined to befriend him despite the past they shared. If he was to select her, there would be no one in the whole of wizarding Britain who could claim he was trying to push his adopted son towards dark magic. The same was probably true if he were to ask Madame Longbottom, but she was older and albeit she had been friendly enough, Amelia’s efforts at moving on were less strained.

Picking up another pancake and floating over the pot of honey, Marvolo decided that he wasn’t going to ask one of the wives of his Death Eaters to be Marcus’ godmother. He didn’t really know them well, so why should he ask one of them?

Finishing up his breakfast, Marvolo tried to come to a decision as he was short on time with the invitations sent out the evening before, Barty having worked nearly in accord to get all the letters written, addressed and attached to owls.

ooOoo

Like most days in the morning, Xerxes was at the school in his office, going through his mail. There constantly were more children found that had magic but were living with muggles, so they had to send out representatives to introduce their families to magic and invite the children to their school constantly too. But most of the letters were from magical families all over the country asking for information on the school. They wanted to know if the school cost anything to send their children there, what the curriculum was, and if they truly offered schooling for Squibs.

It seemed that their society really had been in need of a school for younger kids. Even as he had learned why there hadn’t been one before. Just as Marvolo had predicted, there had manifested a kind of poltergeist not unlike Peeves who existed in Hogwarts, only looking younger than Peeves and behaving more childishly. The poltergeist didn’t have a name yet, and all any adult had ever seen were flashes of a giggling, half transparent floating child vanishing around corners. As the number of missing or damaged supplies hadn’t increased and no child had come to harm, Xerxes wasn’t too concerned over this development.

They would deal with the manifestation of juvenile magic gathered in such quantities in one place just as Hogwarts had done for centuries.

Thinking of the Dementor, at that moment there was the sound of a floo activating in the room where his secretary was sitting at her own desk – a Squib he had hired to help with all the administrative stuff that came with running a school and home for children – likely announcing the arrival of his Lord who just the day before had adopted one of the children under Xerxes’ care.

Signing the letter he just had written – assuring a mother that they did in fact offer a course in tailoring for Squib teenagers – Xerxes looked up in time to see Marvolo enter his office behind a slightly intimidated looking young secretary. “Lord Slytherin for you, Headmaster.”

Xerxes stood and nodded to his young aide. “Thank you, Miss Hopkins. Please ensure that we’ll not be interrupted.”

With a murmured affirmative Miss Hopkins was gone, leaving Xerxes alone with Marvolo, who
had a pensive look about him.

“Sit down, Marvolo. I guess you’re here because the adoption finally came through?” Doing as he had asked his friend to do as well, Xerxes sat down, folding his hands on his desktop on top of the letter he just had finished.

Marvolo sat down in the leather armchair in front of Xerxes’ desk and nodded. “Indeed. Yesterday was spent getting everything ready at Griffin House, sorting out the adoption ceremony and party on Saturday, ensuring that Harry would be able to come as well. And now that that’s done, I wanted to talk with you about when would be the best time for Marcus to move to his new home.”

“You say everything is prepared at your home?” Xerxes got a nod in answer without even the slightest delay. “Then I see no reason to wait any longer. Marcus can come home with you right after school lets out today. The bus will change its route slightly to pick him up tomorrow morning and bring him back again after school is done. And I would suggest that you come to pick him up today.” Marvolo looked a little as if someone had dared to smack him over the head, and Xerxes had to work on maintaining his professional expression. “You can send an elf to pick up his things right away, of course. Maybe you’d like to inform him yourself over lunch? We haven’t spoken with him yet, as we didn’t know how long setting up a room for him would take you.” They had been informed of the change in guardianship the moment Marvolo had signed the papers the day before. “That’s not what you expected to happen?” It was more a statement than a question as Marvolo’s face gave the man's surprise away in a way that Xerxes hadn’t seen all that often. Even back when they all had been just over eleven years old, Marvolo had had a rather uncanny control over his features.

“You’re right. That wasn’t even near what I had expected. But I guess you’re right, Xerxes. There really is no reason to keep Marcus waiting. It might even work in our favour if he gets to live with me for a few days before the adoption ritual.” And there the amusing expression of stunned disbelief and surprise was gone again. “Regarding that ritual. I need to have a look at a few books in your library. I remember dimly that I read about a ritual to accept a distant relative into the more immediate family. That would fit nicely with our situation. And I hope that you can help me sort out the question of godparents.”

Xerxes was sure that his own face briefly revealed his surprise. That wasn’t something he had thought about, which only showed how thorough his Lord was in his planning.

“I think I can’t ask you, as I’m supposedly responsible for your loss of your sons. But I need someone to discuss my available choices.” Xerxes nodded, agreeing readily. Soon they were discussing the merits and possible problems of all the people Marvolo considered candidates for the important position of godparent for Marcus.

ooOoo

He had been excited the whole day. His new dad had rolled his eyes when Marcus had started bouncing as they had waited in the floo room at school for their turn to use the floo to travel home. And before Marcus had been allowed to run up to his room, he had had to put away his cloak and change his shoes.

But after that, only the explanation that his room was on the second floor and had his name on the door had been enough to send him running up the stairs.
And now he was here.

There was only one bed in the room, a big bed with curtains that could be drawn around it. Carvings of guardian dragons at all four posts, a number of rugs that had different patterns lay on the floor. Marcus especially liked the one with cats chasing each other around the edge. There was a shelf with a few books, the figurine of a unicorn prancing, and a box with a few boardgames.

Marcus ran from one end of the room to the other. He looked into his drawers and the wardrobe, inspected his desk with the neat chair in front of it and his small bag for school next to it, ran to the window which looked out on a dreary London day, turned to run back to the bed and saw his new dad standing in the door, smiling.

“There is a room with games down the hall. Harry’s and my room are on this floor as well. Flimm attached plates with our names to the doors there too. You can enter my room when I’m in there and you need me, otherwise please respect my privacy. After dinner the tailor will be here. He needs to take your measurements for the robes you’ll be wearing to your party. Flimm will inform you when it’s time for dinner. Do you need anything?”

Too overwhelmed for words, Marcus simply ran the few steps to where dad was standing and enveloped the other's legs with his arms.

A hand settled on his head, smoothing down his hair. It was wonderful, and he would never have to leave.

Something heavy slid over his foot and Marcus looked down to see a section of Nagini slithering by on the floor. He giggled.

.:Tell me a story, little one:. Nagini demanded and Marcus let go of his dad’s legs to run over to the shelves to take a look at the books. There was his copy of the fairy tales dad could read so well, and a few picture books he enjoyed at school, as well as some he never had seen before. He got one out and had a good look at the picture on the front. An owl blinked up at him from the branch she had been painted on.

.:Sure. Sit on the bed?:. Taking Nagini’s change in direction as agreement Marcus climbed onto the bed and made himself comfortable against the headboard, settling the book in his lap, waiting for Nagini to curl around him, her head positioned so that she had a good view of the pictures.

.:I’ll leave the two of you to it. Flimm will be fetching you for dinner:. The door closed softly as dad left, but Marcus was engrossed in a story he was telling that explained how the crup and the kneasel on the two pages currently opened had managed to nick the pudding from the kitchen, and got to eat it before dinner.

ooooOoooo

Wednesday, 28th of February 1996

The cutlery and plates were splashing around more water than usual while washing themselves under direction of Molly’s spell. She even had spelled a bucket and mop to gather the water from the floor to reduce the risk of her slipping on the wet floor.
Once again she felt conflicted over Lord Slytherin and the man’s actions. All she had heard from Ron and Ginny about how Harry was doing at school indicated that the boy was better off now than he ever had been while staying with his other family. In fact, what little she had learned about them from her twins and Arthur – from when they had picked Harry up for the visit to the Quidditch World Cup – hadn’t painted the most friendly of pictures.

And still she had trouble trusting the evidence before her eyes and disregard her gut feeling that there simply had to be something fishy about the wizard. He had killed so many in the past. How could it be that he had changed so drastically?

They had gotten an invitation to the adoption party that was to be held on Saturday at Potter Manor, she and Arthur, while the letter had said that all other members of the family no longer at school or living at the Burrow also had been invited. Short floo calls to Bill and Percy had confirmed that, just Charlie hadn’t received any owls yet. But that hadn’t been all that surprising, maybe she could have saved the money it had cost her to use the international floo calling system from the post office in Diagon Alley.

Arthur thought that they should go and gift the child a nice little toy, or maybe a sweater. Molly still had doubts.

With another angry flick of her wand she send the chimney sweep up through the chimney to clean it out. Before all this had started with Harry’s adoption the world had been easier. That much was certain.

ooOoo

“Another letter from your father?” Picking up the letter that had been delivered during their midday meal, Enora rolled her eyes, while Nawel muttered not exactly polite descriptors of the girl mocking them under her breath.

A few girls had picked up on the fact that they were receiving letters from the former convict Sirius Black and that the man, probably, was their father and not married to their mother. A few people still had problems with something like that.

Enora had a suspicion that there was envy speaking. The girls acting that way all followed one ringleader, who already was set to marry a wizard almost ten years her senior. She always tried to tell everyone how much money she would have access to, how good that match was for her family assets. It didn’t feel as if she really believed it, more like she was repeating it as often as she could in an effort to convince herself.

So she ignored her – there wasn’t anything they could do to help her anyway – and her cronies, and tried to help Nawel do the same.

“Stop muttering and read.” Enora admonished her sister, breaking the seal on the letter, and folding the letter open.

Once again it was written in English, with just the greeting at the beginning and at the end in stilted French. It was a nice gesture, but also rather awkward. It was just that bad.

The letter answered a few questions from their last letter – Sirius never had been to Namibia, and he rather liked spicy food – and asked a few more of his own. This exchange of questions that
seemed a little disjointed and without context had started a few letters ago, and was intended to make it easier for them to get to know each other a little before they met in person.

But this letter contained a question that had a lot of context. He asked them if they would be all right if he brought his godson and another boy with him to the house for a few days over the holidays.

“What do you think?” Nawel asked in a rather low voice, making reading her opinion on the matter from tone alone all but impossible.

Enora shrugged. “It might help if we and mother aren’t the only ones there with him. His godson might also be another source for information. Watching them interact might help us get a better picture of who he really is?” The idea of a week of only them, their mother, and a relative stranger who most likely was their father in a house in the countryside had something daunting about it. Adding another teenager and a younger kid into that mix might make it easier to bear. “Let’s make a list of all the reasons that’s a good idea, and all those why it wouldn’t be a good idea.”

Nawel groaned playfully, her dark brown eyes sparkling with amusement at teasing her sister. “If we must.”

“Yes, we have to.”

ooOoo

It was funny how the Daily Prophet managed to ship as far as Egypt the same day as it came out. It probably had something to do with magic. Albus snorted and unfolded his third example of the newspaper he had received. His healers had decided that he was stable enough to read unfiltered news information again. Albus was pretty sure that was a good sign for his mental health and stability.

He wasn’t so sure it was a good idea to read the Daily Prophet if he wanted to improve more. But sadly it was the only publication from home that brought a good mixture of actual news from Quidditch, over politics, to society news. All the other publications he could pick that came from Britain were specific magazines, like Transfiguration Monthly, and others mostly publishing studies, papers, and other research pertaining to their field.

When he spotted the article detailing how Marvolo Slytherin had adopted another child without a proper family, Albus contemplated what might have happened to the boy he had found in that orphanage so long ago if he had been adopted by a magical family. Would they have been able to curb the dangerous tendencies Albus still believed he had seen?

There was no way to be sure. And as his healers insisted, there was no real benefit in speculating about past events and how they might have turned out if he himself had made a different decision. He wasn’t responsible for everything that happened, and it wasn’t his duty to prevent bad things from happening.

And most importantly – as the healers reiterated constantly – it wasn’t his place to decide what bad even was.

Deciding to be happy for a little boy by the name of Marcus that he was getting an older brother as caring as Harry, Albus moved on to the small advertisements section. The most curious things
could be found there.

ooOoo

With narrowed eyes he read the morning paper and the announcement in it. Of course he already had heard about it through the Ministry grapevine the day before, but seeing it written drove the blade in deeper.

Once again the Ministry had let itself be led by Slytherin like a crup on a leash. Most of them were just too happy to avoid conflict, bow to those seemingly more powerful, and simply do whatever promised to bring the most profit for them.

Crushing the paper in his hands, sending the sound of tearing paper into the otherwise silent kitchen – his wife once again in bed dosed with potions to ward off the grief – he took deep breaths. He would win nothing if he acted out of anger. He would work patiently, methodically, and without rest towards his goal, following the plan he had made. There was no other way he could possibly rid the world of the evil that went by the name of Slytherin.

oooOOooo

Saturday, 2nd of March 1996

Before they would go over to the Manor for a party, they had gathered around the fireplace in the kitchen at Griffin House. Or rather they would gather there. The adults currently were milling about in the formal dining room, and only Harry and Marcus were currently in the kitchen.

Harry was crouching on the floor, a piece of chalk in hand carefully drawing the circle of the ritual blessing Marvolo had handed to him. It wasn’t the same circle they had used when Theo had gotten a younger brother. Aiden hadn’t been part of the Nott family magic before the ritual, but Marcus already had access. His ability to speak with snakes was proof of that.

So Marvolo had spent many hours in various libraries – family libraries of different old families – searching for an old ritual blessing he vaguely remembered to once have seen. In the end he had been able to find it. The ritual was similar to the one used for Aiden with lots of runes for family-related terms, but it was different in many ways as well. For one, there weren’t any of the smaller circles with different family crests. Only three small ones, one with a rune for brother, one for father, and one for child.

Marcus was sitting on the big table, swinging his legs, watching with interest what Harry was doing. “Do you learn that at school? Mrs. Moors told us about runes and what they can be used for last week. But she said it’s dangerous if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Harry hummed, and finished one rune with a resolute stroke. “If you combine the wrong runes in the wrong way it can get dangerous. That’s why father will have a look over what I have drawn before we begin.” Harry looked up and smiled over to his little brother.
It felt strange, he had a little brother.

“Why is that circle green?” Marcus pointed to the one Marvolo would stand in later, the one with the rune for father.

“Because I used green chalk for it.” Harry laughed when Marcus stuck his tongue out at him. “The instructions father gave me say to draw that part in green. It doesn’t have an explanation. We’ll have to ask him.”

Marcus hummed, fiddling with the hems of his silken robes. Harry had draped his own robe – the one he had that represented the Slytherin family – over one of the chairs, so it wouldn’t get in the way while he was crawling over the floor. The embroidery was delicate and Harry wasn’t about to risk it catching on anything.

Marcus’ robes were of similar make, as he was just as much of the Ancient and Nobel House of Slytherin as Harry and Marvolo. It was obvious that Marcus was accustomed to wearing robes each day at school, but robes made of silk were something different still.

“Are you excited?” Harry picked up the parchment Marvolo had handed him before sending him to lay the circle to check what was the next part to be drawn.

Marcus hummed. “Dad said there will be cake and ice-cream later. I look forward to that.” At the tone the younger boy used Harry looked up in surprise. Marcus scowled at the circle, making Harry smile. He was pretty sure he knew what the problem was.

“No reason to worry, Marcus. Father is an expert in this. And if he wasn’t sure I’m good enough to do this right, he wouldn’t let me attempt this. And he’ll check before we begin. I have participated in a few different rituals by now. It’s safe.”

And just as the weather could change within minutes in April, Marcus’ mood changed again.

“What kind of rituals were they?” Suddenly he sounded eager again.

Harry sat back on the floor – paying attention not to smudge any of the lines in the rune circle – and looked up to his little brother. “One was the adoption ritual when Aiden was adopted into the family of my friend Theo. The other one was one Healer Greengrass performed. A diagnostic ritual. They both went fine. And this will as well.”

Marcus scrunched his face up. “Dia-what?”

Harry smiled. That might have been a little big of a word. “Diagnostic. The ritual checked if there was anything wrong with me. Like broken bones, or a cold, or something like that. It’s quicker than checking everything with charms. And everything was all right.” Marcus seemed content with the explanation and looked on as Harry finished the circle with a few markings selected to represent their family. Snakes were prominent among that group.

Harry felt content and elated over the prospect that this ritual would finish the process of Marcus becoming his younger brother, and that he would have had a significant part in the ritual preparation.

ooOoo
Nagini was resting near her human and one of the contained fires that spread nice heat around it. There were a lot of other humans around, bringing with them an interesting plethora of smells. Marvolo had explained earlier that his family was about to gain a new member. She had shortly spoken with both little ones this morning before they had gone off to the room where the food was prepared and she wasn’t allowed to hunt. The elf was most insistent on that, and even had set some magic around the access points hindering Nagini from entering the room. But for today that magic had been lifted. Nagini was to be part of the ceremony.

That was bound to be interesting, even though it was quite boring at the moment. Humans had such an odd way of communicating.

.:Nagini?:. Marvolo caught her attention. She turned her head so that she had her human in her line of sight. .:Can you please check on the boys and see if Harry has finished the ritual circle?:.

.:I’ll check on the little one and the even littler one:. Nagini agreed and then started to slither over the wooden, smooth floor towards the opening in the wall everyone was using to get in and out of the room. She would need better names for her human’s hatchlings. Maybe the one she had called little one before had a point. The new one was so much more fitting to the description.

Nagini chuckled to herself when the humans scattered before her, making room for her magnificent form to move. She really missed the skittish, fat man who had smelled so interestingly of rodents. It had always been fun to chase him around a room, or get him to jump by slithering by just a little nearer than needed.

When she made it to the room smelling of cooked meats and plants, Nagini took in the position of her small humans, raising the front of her body a little off the floor. .:Master wants to know if the circle is finished:. She stayed away from where the bigger one of her small humans was sitting on the floor. Marvolo had taught her the dangers of disturbing a painted circle on the floor. Before her human didn’t tell her it was safe to slither over the ground covered in funny smelling markings she would stay clear of it.

.:I’m finished, Nagini. So father can come in to check my work:. The bigger hatchling – she really needed better names for them – answered, turning a little so he could see her.

.:Are you excited as well? I’m really excited!. the small hatchling hissed, sending jittery vibrations from where he was sitting towards the floor and all over the room.

.:I’m happy to have another human here at home. And you being here makes my human happy. I’m happy about that:. Nagini hissed at the small one with amusement. She found the concept of caring for the young slightly puzzling. Snakes usually only protected their young until they hatched, if even that long. Marvolo once had explained that human hatchlings couldn’t look after themselves from the start, that they even needed to be carried around. Nagini wasn’t all that sure Marvolo was serious with that, but she could see that the small one they had visited at that place for human hatchlings wasn’t yet skilled enough to hunt for his own food. .:I’ll let Marvolo know:. With that she turned around and slithered over her own body to return to the room filled with grown humans talking.

Nagini watched all that followed with interest. First her human went to where the little one had drawn on the floor, checking the markings and then doing some magic to make sure she couldn’t smudge the markings when she moved over them. After that the humans moved from where they had gathered before to where Nagini normally wasn’t allowed to go.

Her human took control of the situation telling everyone where they should stand, arranging her
two small humans in certain spots, taking another inside the marking, while everyone else gathered to form a circle of warm bodies around the circle of chalk.

..: Nagini, please move so that you are a circle between me and my two sons:. Marvolo asked her at one point, and Nagini readily followed the directions. This would bring her into the middle of everything. She moved so her head was resting near the feet of the smallest human, who had the man smelling of dried plants and fire and a woman smelling of soap, beeswax, and parchment at his shoulders, hissing friendly words to him. The small one was so nervous, his heart sounded like a bird in a cage trying to get out.

People started to speak at the outer edges of the circle, each lighting a white candle when they said something, usually short. Then the two grown humans next to the small hatchling spoke before it was the turn of her humans, her family. And the air started to fill with the feeling of something almost like lightning crackling along her scales.

..:Marcus, son of distant family I do not know, I welcome you into my house and under my protection. I promise to be your protector, guardian, and father for as long as you need me to be. And to hold you close as family as long as I live:. her human hissed first.

..:Marcus, child of distant family I do not know, I welcome you to be my little brother, to grow up by my side, to play with me, and quarrel, as brothers do. I promise to be your protector, friend, and older brother for as long as we both live:. the little one added, filling the air with more of that delicious and curious feeling.

..:Together we’ll be from now on a family of three:. The hissing got really loud at the end when they all hissed the words together, and Nagini felt the energy charging forward and sideways into the humans around her, binding them all together in their smells even more than they already had been.

That had been nice. Especially the warmth now filling her. Maybe they would find another hatchling they could claim for their family so they could repeat this. She really would like that.

ooOoo

Children were running around, chased by Harry who was the only teenager present at the party. He had been pressed into donning wings fashioned after a Hungarian Horntail, spreading his arms and flapping them to make it seem as if he was flying, and was sporting a silly headdress as well. But Marvolo had to admit that his older son – and wasn’t that a truly glorious and frightening feeling, to have two sons – managed an impressive imitation of an angry dragon chasing away knights who were trying to steal from the dragon’s nest.

“He makes a convincing dragon,” Amelia unknowingly affirmed Marvolo’s own musings.

“I fear that it might be the result of first-hand experience,” Marvolo stated drily, grinning despite himself.

Amelia snorted, shifting a little so she had a better view of the children now turning and launching a coordinated attack on the dragon. “How much do you bet that the Prophet will have at least one article tomorrow wondering how it came to be that I’m Marcus’ godmother?”
“I won’t take that bet,” Marvolo snorted, that was a certainty. “But I’m happy to provide more gossip for the mills. If I’m honest, I’m rather curious to read what they make of me choosing the newly named Lord Prince and the Head of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement.” The little knights had managed to drag the dragon down to the ground – freed from snow and under warming charms set by the elves – and now Harry was calling for mercy between helpless laughter as he was being tickled.

Children could be cruel was the saying, and considering that a tickling curse was a rather effective tool in torture, that right there was proof of that saying.

“Well, I fear that they won’t go with common sense,” Amelia said, sipping from her cup of warmed punch. “They probably will once again claim that we are courting, and will play up the angle of Dark Wizard with the Professor.”

Marvolo nodded, giving in to temptation and morphing his expression to one more grave than he ever would truly show. “It can’t be that I searched for two strong individuals, of clear moral convictions, old enough to care for a child should it come to that, with assets and skills, insights and experience that could benefit my son. No it has to be that I want to sway a witch to marry me and that another only agreed to the position to corrupt a young innocent boy towards darkness.”

Amelia laughed, covering her mouth with one hand. When she had regained her composure she gestured towards where Xerxes stood with the parents of his heiress as well as a few others who obviously were muggles. It seemed that inviting all of Marcus’ classmates including siblings and parents had been a good idea.

“Would you be so kind as to introduce me to some of the non-magical guests of your party?” She asked.

Marvolo gave her a look. “This is Marcus’ party. But of course I’ll introduce you to some of the parents of muggle-born witches and wizards.”

The two objectives that he had had when he had given Barty the list of people to invite seemed to have been met. Make it a memorable party for Marcus, and provide networking opportunities to promote the inclusion of families with dormant magical blood into their society. It was really working out rather well.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last chapter for this year. I'll take a break of three weeks over Christmas. I wish you all a peaceful season of family gatherings! And a good start into the next year!

Thank you all for your comments and reviews they help me write on a hard day!

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Last edited 14th of December 2018
Time Flies

Chapter Notes

I wish you all a Happy and Healthy Year 2019!

I currently am facing some technical troubles but hope to resolve them soon. So if I'm slow in reacting please have patience ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

March 1996

Settling into life with a small child in the house had its upsides and downsides, but Marvolo felt that the downsides were more numerous. It was nice to eat dinner in the company of Marcus, listening to the boy telling about his day and what he had learned in school, with Nagini hissing commentary now and again. They often spoke parseltongue at home nowadays.

But days like this one were trying, to say the least.

A door closed with a bang, angry, quick steps running along the hall on the family floor, before Marvolo heard the door open again, heavier steps following. "Master Marcus, come back here! You are not finished with setting the room to rights yet!" That was the voice of the nanny Marvolo had hired to help him care for Marcus in the evenings and on weekends when school was closed and there were no lessons for the day.

Mrs. Peters was another Squib he had found through his Death Eaters. She was a born Greengrass – but no one had volunteered more information on her parents – had married a Muggle who was now dead, never had a child of her own, and had worked many years caring for the children of other people.

She seemed competent, but today had been a bad day from the start.

Marcus hadn't wanted the porridge Flimm had made them, and had rejected most vehemently every alternative the house-elf had offered. It seemed the bad weather – a storm with heavy rain – had caused the teachers to have the children stay indoors for their playtime usually spent outside. Additionally, Marcus had complained that all the snow was gone.

All in all, this had been a really trying day for all of them.

With a sigh Marvolo stood from his desk, and made his way upstairs where he could hear the nanny knocking on the door to Marcus' room. They had been tidying up the playroom then.

"Can I help?" Marvolo asked and the nanny turned from the door to face her employer.

"The door is stuck. I don't think that's usually something this door does?" Marvolo shook his head, indicating that indeed this door wasn't one to get stuck. "Thought so. Then it probably was blocked using magic. Marcus is most unhappy today. He wasn't able or willing to concentrate on any of the games and started to throw toy blocks around. When I told him that we would stop and clean up the room he helped at first." She gave a sigh. "I think he's more than a little frustrated with how this day went."
Marvolo nodded. "I'll have a look at the door and a talk with my son. Maybe you want to take a cup of tea and a piece of cake down in the kitchen? Flimm certainly will be happy to provide you with both. My paperwork can wait." He wasn't too keen on bookkeeping and report reading anyway. Spending time with his son, even if he was cranky, was a better use of his time.

With a grateful nod Mrs. Peters made room in front of the door. "That sounds like a wonderful idea. I'll be back later?"

"I guess we most likely will need help getting ready for bed again." If he had to, Marvolo was pretty sure he and Marcus would manage, but it was easier with her help.

When she was gone Marvolo took a few deep breaths to calm himself down and then cast a silent unlocking spell at the door – Alohomora was enough – and went in.

Marcus was on his bed, face down, legs hanging over the side, listlessly punching a pillow with his tiny fist. The boy certainly had had a bad day judging by the picture he made. Marvolo felt a little bad for smiling and quickly schooled his face in a friendly one showing that he could feel Marcus' frustration.

"Wasn't a good day?" Marvolo asked as he sat down next to Marcus on the bed, smoothing down his casual robes as he did so.

"No," was the muffled reply.

"Want to help me clean up the playroom with magic?" The trick had worked before, and maybe watching some harmless magic being done would help Marcus to get out of his bad mood.

Hesitantly Marcus rolled over onto his back, looking up to where Marvolo was sitting and smiling at him. His efforts gained Marvolo a hesitant nod. With a hand stretched out for his son, Marvolo stood up hoping to lure his son up from the bed.

It worked like a charm, and together they raced through the hall and into the playroom, Marcus laughing and Marvolo smiling. When they entered the room Marvolo got to see a mess of toys spread out all over the room, colourful carpet and rugs covered with equally colourful blocks of wood, figurines of different animals as well as magical creatures, and the pieces of at least two jigsaw puzzles.

"Let's clean up here. You tell me where the pieces go, and I'll levitate them there." Of course Marvolo knew that this was kind of a cheat, and some would argue that he was going too easy on Marcus. But he felt that forcing the child to work on cleaning the room on his own the tedious way even as he was frustrated for some reason would be detrimental. It always had made him more angry and less likely to cooperate and listen. After many hours with Madam Goyle he guessed that those harsh methods were one of the reasons he always had treated emotions and emotional responses as weaknesses.

Better avoid creating the same environment for his young son.

Placing everything back where it belonged was quick work with this method, and Marcus was a little less hard to handle once that chore was out of the way. When Marvolo later went into his son's bedroom to say good night the boy sat against the headboard, his favourite stuffed snake clutched in his hand and a pleading look on his face.

"Can you make it snow?"

With a twirl of his wand Marvolo conjured up some dry, never-melt snow that started to fall from
the ceiling and soon created small banks against objects and furniture in the room.

"And real snow? The kind that melts when it gets inside? I want to build another snowman!" So that had been the reason for Marcus' bad mood after school.

"It's spring now. There won't be snow until the next winter. But soon it'll be warm enough to go swimming. And broom riding outside." Marvolo knew how to change the weather in an area to get snow, and he even would be able to do it. But this kind of magic was one that was illegal for very good reasons. It had been banned once because people had blamed all kinds of weather mishaps on magical folk. New knowledge on how the weather worked on a global level made it quite clear that manipulation in one area, even just a small one, could have devastating effects somewhere else, and even bad long-term effects for the whole planet.

In short, it really wasn't worth the hassle.

"But I want to build a snowman," Marcus pouted, folding his arms over his chest, strangling the stuffed snake in the process.

"How about, I read you a story about a snowman?" Marvolo asked in an attempt to derail a possible temper tantrum. They had just recently added a book on the seasons and what changed between them to the child-appropriate library, which held several short stories about things one could see, experience, or expect in any given season.

And so the day ended with Marvolo imitating the voices of a snowman, a robin, and a squirrel. Marcus had fun and finally went to sleep, and Marvolo successfully had avoided doing the most boring paperwork ever invented for another evening.

oooOOooo

With each day that passed, the final exams were drawing nearer. And for Harry and his year-mates, the big OWL exams were coming up. Even students who normally weren't prone to care much about exams until the very last minute could be seen studying in the library quite regularly. These weren't the normal exams they were used to. They would have to answer questions about everything they had learned since they had started at Hogwarts, not only what they had covered in the past year.

Knowing his weak points, Harry had managed to jump over his own shadow, leave his pride behind, and ask Draco for help with his practical Potions work. Between those regular sessions – at least weekly to build up muscle memory on how to prepare ingredients – homework, practice with the Slytherin Quidditch team, lessons with Professor Snape for Occlumency, meetings with Madame Goyle every other week, and preparations for the Defence Club, there wasn't much time left.

When Hermione had offered – and in Ron's case insisted – to create study plans for them all once again, Harry had accepted and made sure that she counted the time spent preparing the Defence Club meetings and the club meetings themselves as study time for Defence Against the Dark Arts.

One aspect of those plans was that their circle of friends regularly met in the library for study sessions.

"Where's that information?" Theo grumbled under his breath, quickly paging through the Potions book they had been using since first year and which he had picked up from one of the shelves nearby.
"What are you searching for?" Hermione asked without looking up from the text she was scanning for something.

"The different uses of snake fangs in potions. I thought it would be in here, as I had references about this in my study notes from third year. But I can't find it." Theo looked up and over to where Hermione was sitting, frustration clearly on his face. The stress was getting to all of them.

"Have you looked in the theory section to the cure for boils? I think it's hidden between some more interesting titbits of information near the end of the page. Easily overlooked," Hermione said after only a short moment of hesitation, seemingly not really paying attention to the people around her.

Theo threw Harry an incredulous look, and Harry only shrugged. He didn't know how she was doing it, but when it came to books and what to find where inside them, he wouldn't second-guess her without very good reason.

A chuckle went around the table when Theo looked up from the book only a moment later, wide-eyed and surprised. "Thank you, Hermione!"

Some time later – Harry quickly lost track of time when he lost himself in magical theory nowadays, integrating what he now knew about Parselmagic made it that much more interesting – quiet footfalls neared their table in an out-of-the-way corner, and all of them looked up. "Hello, Ginny!" Daphne greeted the younger redhead, who slid in next to Luna, who was sitting right next to Harry, and smiled.

"I hope you lot aren't against me sitting with you?" Ginny asked, setting her book bag down next to her chair. "Eloise and Vicky are reading Witch Weekly up in our dorm and are giggling like mad, and I still have to finish my essay for Defence. Why it's important to know the habitats of potentially dangerous creatures." She managed to imitate Professor Slinkhard's voice and demeanour quite well, getting a few snickers from the mix of Gryffindor and Slytherin students sitting around the table. Luna seemed oblivious and lost in her own head, while Hermione gave a stern, disapproving look but refrained from saying anything. "I just know he wants us to write some drivel on how it's easier to avoid such places when one knows what to look for."

For a while they worked in concentrated silence, passing around books, asking quiet questions of their neighbours. It was so much easier to learn here than in the common room. Especially as Harry could sit with Luna, close enough to feel the warmth of her body next to his, and spend time with her this way. When Theo swapped places with Daphne to sit at the corner of the table with Ginny, Harry had to hide a grin by looking down at his own notes for Herbology. He was taking notes on learning cards on different plants with drawings of leaves, flowers, stem sections, and fruits or seeds if the plant had them. One of the sixth year Slytherins had seen the cards in the common room and offered money in exchange for a copy once Harry was finished.

When Ron came over to them, no book bag in sight, but his robes in disarray and his face flushed, Harry knew that this wasn't going to end well.

"What are you doing here, Ginny!" Ron seemed really angry but somehow managed to whisper-scream at his sister, his face blotchy red in anger. "Lavender said that you were on your way to the library to meet with Nott!" Harry was thinking fast to find a way to avoid a conflict in the library. This had the potential to get really loud and maybe even violent pretty fast.

"What is it to you?" Ginny furiously whispered back. "Are you angry because he's a Slytherin? Or because of the rumours told about his father?"

Theo carefully moved himself in his chair to face Ron, his body between Ginny and her brother.
Harry placed his quill down and reached for his wand slowly, trying to decide if he should do something and get problems with all three later, or if he simply would stay at the sideline waiting to see if his intervention would be needed. Maybe he should be ready to cast a shield charm over the books?

For a moment Ron seemed thrown for a loop, as if he hadn't thought about that particular angle of the problem yet. "No!" Was Ron's final conclusion, while he was shaking his head, still furiously glaring at Ginny. "Why should I have something against Slytherins?" Harry felt his eyebrows crawl up towards his hairline at that proclamation. That development was recent and a little startling that Ron seemed unaware of how this had been different not really all that long ago. But if Harry himself could come to call Marvolo father in that time, Ron could come to see that Slytherin didn't equate evil. They all were growing up, some faster than others.

But Ron wasn't finished. "You're too young! You can't start dating just yet! My little sister can't start snogging an older boy! That's simply not right!" Now Hermione was paying more attention to the whispered shouting match than the direction from where she obviously feared Madam Pince would appear any moment.

Harry watched, wand in hand but carefully concealed, as Ginny's face turned red in her anger. "How dare you! I'm plenty old enough to decide such things for myself!"

Suddenly Ginny and Ron both held their wands in hand, several people, precious books, and a table in the way. It didn't take long and they all were standing, wand in hand, a wary Theo clearly unsure what to do, a pair of siblings sending silent death glares at each other, and the rest of their study group worried about how this would develop. Or dissolve.

This could turn bad so very quickly. And no one was about to do anything. Harry felt the need to act, to prevent the disaster he could see coming. Spells flying, damaging the books, maybe even injuring one of them, earning them all a ban from the library for the rest of their days.

That wouldn't do.

With – much – more authority and conviction than he felt, Harry took a step forward to draw the attention of all present to himself. "Let's move this somewhere else. The library clearly isn't the right place for this discussion." He could see the moment both Ron and Ginny wanted to direct their ire at him for seemingly taking the other's side. Harry held up his hands, silently casting a silencing charm first on Ginny – her hexes were much more vicious than those of her brother – and then on Ron. "Don't be silly. Both of you. Get a move on!"

To Harry's surprise the others started packing up their materials, seemingly all eager to see this play out to the end. He felt like rolling his eyes. Why were people so willing to watch drama enfold between others? Quickly they managed to return books to the shelves they had taken them from, gather their stuff back into their bags, and march out of the library a few doors down into one of the many unused rooms around the castle.

Ginny and Ron were still glaring at each other, but Theo and Daphne managed to keep them apart on their short way to prevent any violent outbursts. Meanwhile Harry tried to come up with a way to clear the air. Just a few days back Ron had wanted to know how far Harry and Luna had gone. That he now had declared Ginny too young to do the same made him look like a hypocrite in Harry's eyes.

When Theo moved to stand with Ginny, Ron exploded and Harry's spell ceased to work. "Get away from my little sister! She's not old enough for a boyfriend! Keep your hands off her!"
Resigned Harry lifted the spell still affecting Ginny, and watched her storm at her brother, dust rising from the floor under her angry steps. "I have no boyfriend! And what would you say if I was with Harry? Would that be all right then?" Ron managed an impressive imitation of a fish, clearly uncomfortable with that accusation, but he did glance towards where Harry was standing, Luna at his side.

Ginny saw that motion and turned on Harry. "And you! You're together with Luna, who is in the same year as me. You can't really be of the opinion that I'm too young to have a boyfriend, or have one a year older than me!"

Holding up his hands, wand held between two fingers in his right, Harry shook his head. "Of course not. I just wanted to get us out of there before we all earned a ban from the library for the near future. I for one feel that you're capable of defending yourself quite well, and are mature enough to have a boyfriend. And I know Theo to be a good bloke. He'll respect a witch's wishes. Sort it out between the two of you, Ron, Ginny. I for one agree with Ginny that she's the one to decide here."

Taking Luna's hand Harry turned to leave. This clearly was something that Ginny had to sort out with her brother by herself. The hurt on Ron's face as Harry so openly took the girl's side in this was hard to witness. That Hermione smiled at him approvingly didn't really improve the situation.

Most of the others followed Harry out of the room, and they could hear the screaming before they had reached the doors to the library again.

They still had studying to do.

oooOOooo

Now and then Severus enjoyed a leisurely stroll along the halls of Hogwarts just before curfew. Knowing that he would return to his wife, a nice cup of warm herbal tea – too late to drink anything stimulating and find a sound sleep – made the silent march into a welcome exercise.

The possibility to catch a few students out of bounds only made the whole much sweeter. It always was fun seeing teenagers scramble and blush because they had thought to have found the best spot for hiding out. But much to each of the Professors' amusement, the same places had been in use by generations of students probably since the Founders' time.

As always when spring was just around the corner, the number of students he found in compromising positions during his regularly scheduled evening strolls had increased in the recent weeks.

Luckily Madame Pomfrey was diligent in answering all questions a student might come to her with – she regularly advocated for a mandatory health class to be added to the curriculum, because only a fraction of the boys ever asked her anything – and handed out contraceptive potions without asking too many questions, keeping the students' confidence. Severus himself made sure each year's new prefects were able to answer questions for their peers. But when he had learned that a certain book was making the rounds of the dorms, originating with Mr. Slytherin, he had been glad. There never was too much information on offer to prevent mishaps between students. Only informed teenagers could make informed decisions.

Today he already had sent Mr. Nott down to the dungeons a few corridors away from the Gryffindor tower entrance. At least the young man had managed to set up a perimeter ward-like spell to warn him and whoever he had been with if someone was approaching. As a result, only Mr. Nott had had to listen to a short but stern scolding before being sent down. The guilty look on the
boy's face had Severus suspicious, though, that there might be someone else around still.

Which was why he currently was walking up the stairs to the Astronomy Tower. It was a clear night, and even as Severus never had participated in such activities as a teenager himself, he knew for a fact that stargazing was a pastime that was considered romantic by many. The need to huddle together to stay warm only added to the appeal.

The moment Severus reached the top of the tower where lessons were held, the cold night air hit him in the face, stealing his breath for a moment. There was still quite a bit of bite to the air, but the view of the stars was spectacular. As usual the lesson of the day in Astronomy would only start at a later point, but there was whispering in the air, and the distinct wet sound of lips moving against each other in a kiss.

A few steps out from the staircase gave Severus a much better view which allowed him to spot a pair of students seated near the inner wall, not paying the stars any mind as they had wrapped their arms around each other and their faces were attached at the lips.

Taking a few more silent steps, Severus positioned himself for maximum effect before he cleared his throat to get the couple's attention.

A blonde head and one with dark hair turned to look at the sudden noise, making Severus smirk. "Mr. Slytherin, Miss Lovegood, you might need the reminder that it's almost curfew and you both are too far from your common rooms to make it back in time. Shall I deduct points now, or wait until the time truly is up?"

The boy blushed, but the girl only smiled serenely her face naturally flushed from the snogging Severus had interrupted.

"No answer? I gladly would add a detention for the both of you. Naturally on different evenings." As Severus had come to expect Miss Lovegood seemed unaffected, but Mr. Slytherin quickly made to stand, putting his clothes back to order as he did so.

"No need for that, Professor. We set a timer so we would be back in the common room on time." The boy trailed off, blushing even more and taking on a most sheepish look. Severus' statement seemingly had only now reached the boy's brain.

"Indeed," Severus drawled. "Go on, I'll make sure you won't get lost on your way down." He waved for the students to precede him and watched in amusement as they did so, Potter… no, Slytherin, quickly picking up a blanket from the ground as he did so.

"I'm sorry, Professor," Mr. Slytherin started as the three of them were descending the stairs. "We must have missed the timer. Please don't punish Luna for my error."

Ever the self-sacrificing idiot. But maybe this was done in an effort to impress the young lady and could therefore be called a Slytherin tactic. Unwilling to get too deep into that line of thought, Severus moved to another problem he had with Mr. Slytherin being so far from the common room that late in the evening only with a younger girl as company, clearly not paying attention to his surroundings. "I thought that you had strict instructions from your father, Mr. Slytherin, to not move along the halls of Hogwarts on your own. Or have I missed some significant development that cancelled these orders?"

What Severus would have given to be able to see the boy's face in that moment. His shoulders stiffened as if he was preparing to say something, or to take a blow, but nothing was said and the posture corrected to be more elegant and projecting confidence. What had the boy wanted to say?
And why had he decided to keep his silence?

It only took a moment for the knut to fall. "I see. Nonetheless, I would prefer for you not to wander the halls close to curfew. Am I understood, Mr. Slytherin?"

"Yes, sir," was the only response the boy gave, still holding hands with the girl from Ravenclaw.

They handed over Miss Lovegood to a Ravenclaw prefect they encountered on the way to Ravenclaw tower, and then walked on in silence towards the Slytherin common room. After having lectured the boy on not going anywhere alone, Severus couldn't simply let the boy go down there on his own now.

"Make sure to meet with your girlfriend during the day, Mr. Slytherin. Do I need to explain sensible precautionary measures to you?" It always was better to ask after such things than simply assume that one of the students under his care already knew what they needed.

The blush that had vanished on their way down made a sudden reappearance. "That's… all right, sir. Father made sure I learned everything I needed to know about that over the summer. So, no need for any further explanations. Sir."

As Severus was pretty sure his Lord would indeed make sure his heir would know everything he needed to avoid being an embarrassment to the family, he let the boy go without making him sit through an explanation that would be awkward for them both.

If there was one thing – beside soiled nappies – that he wasn't looking forward to about being a father, it was the need to explain everything related to procreation to his child. Maybe Sonja would volunteer for that particular task.

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It didn't take long after she had knocked for the door to open. "Cousin Nymphadora!" Sirius called out standing just inside the door. "Come in, come in! Remus is in the kitchen, if you're here to see him." Sirius waggled with his eyebrows and Dora rolled her eyes, drawing her wand.

"Don't call me Nymphadora, cousin! Or next time I come over I'll get you a nice chewing toy, cousin." Most of the time Dora liked Sirius, he was fun, but his insistence on calling her by the silly name her mother had given her to rile her up was getting on her nerves.

They both entered the house – so much cleaner than when it had been used as Order Headquarters – and Dora cast around for a topic to bring up that would capture Sirius’ interest. Better talk about something than let his mind wander and come up with pranks or something. "How is renovating at the summer house going? Do you think I could go there for a vacation sometime?"

"It's going well. Bill tells me that there aren't that many curses or cursed objects there. The most problems he had were with spells disintegrating and all kinds of pests. From rats to doxies to boggarts. He'll be finished soon. He said there's someone who helps from time to time, and I can get the elf to clean and renovate there." Sirius sounded happy about the progress he described. Dora could hardly imagine how it must be to prepare to meet your own children for the first time and they were already teenagers.

The way to the kitchen wasn't long, and before they could delve deeper into the renovation, they already had arrived. Remus sat at the table with a scroll before him, a well with red ink next to his hand, a steaming cup of what probably was tea near at hand. "Remus!" Dora felt butterflies in her stomach as the wizard turned around, pausing in whatever he was working on.
"Dora! What a surprise. Come sit down. Do you want to have a cup of tea?" Remus, ever the gentleman, stood from his chair, moving one facing his out so she could sit, and then went over to the stove.

"What are you working on, Remus? And why red ink?" Dora tilted her head in an attempt to read the scroll or at least get a glimpse of the writing. She morphed her hair into a shorter cut, spikes on her head, so it didn't fall into her eyes again.

"I'm marking a copy of Harry's latest history homework. As most know, Binns isn't exactly the best professor, so I've had the job as Harry's history tutor since the summer. I still mark his essays and answer any questions he has." He waved his hand, smiling a little self-consciously. "I get paid, but it still feels like helping Prong's little son like a friend should do."

"He'll have a much better chance at a good OWL result in history than many other students since Binns died!" Dora called out, grinning.

Remus laughed and walked back to the table carefully balancing a cup of tea in his hand. "I'm pretty sure Harry's friend, Miss Granger, will have no problem either. And probably quite a few others as well." Remus proclaimed, placing the cup in front of Dora on the worn table. "Do you want lemon? Sugar? Cream?"

"Sugar is fine." Dora said, accepting the small dish Remus handed her. "There aren't that many students in each year willing and able to self-study to such an extent." Taking a sip from her now-sweetened tea, Dora morphed her hair back into the style she had noticed drawing Remus' attention a few times. "Have you read the Prophet yet?"

Remus sighed, leaning back in his chair. "I have. You're referencing the article on this month's Wizengamot session?" He didn't look as hopeful as Dora had expected he would be.

"Yes!" Dora felt like shaking the wizard before her. Why wasn't he happier? "They have decided to move the responsibility for monitoring from the Department for Magical Creatures to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement! Isn't that a big step in the right direction?"

Remus gave another sigh. "Maybe. Dora, you have to see that this change is like a single stick trying to stop a flood. Even this doesn't change much. There is still a registry. We still will be treated as dangerous beasts. Still watched with suspicion. And do you think, just because the Department handling all the demeaning oversight no longer is named Creatures, that will change the fact that people still think it?" He leaned forward, placing his head in his hands.

And Dora felt out of her depth. She had thought this was a good development, and it surely was, but she hadn't realised how hollow this had to feel for someone faced with the prejudice day in, day out. She scooted her chair over so she was sitting next to Remus, carefully placing her arm around him. She certainly didn't have his insight but she wanted to learn. "It'll take time, you're right. Hopefully a lot of changes like this one will, in time, result in a bigger change."

Bill was on his way to get some lunch in a nearby pub when he spotted a now-familiar figure in the entrance hall, leaving one of the teller stations. Without a thought Bill quickened his steps and called out to the wizard he had gotten to know better over the last weeks. "Marvolo!"

The man in his well-made robes and cloak – wool with intricate embroidery of different abstract designs – turned and stopped to wait for Bill. "Bill, on your way to a lunch break?" Marvolo asked as he fell into step with him as he caught up.
"Yes," Bill agreed, looking the other over. He seemed tired. "What brought you to the bank today?"

"Setting up a trust fund for Marcus. And amending my will. I didn't find the time before today. And to do it now I had to shift quite a lot of tasks around." Shaking his head, Marvolo carded his hand through his painstakingly styled hair, destroying its careful order. "My respect for each witch and wizard caring for a child on their own has grown tremendously. Really. Marcus is in school most of the day, five days a week, and still my time seems to have shrunk almost by three parts." He laughed, and Bill once again noticed how much more human Marvolo had become since the first time they had met the last summer.

"I can't claim to really know. Even as the big brother to six siblings I never paid much attention to what mum did. But I know that she's struggling with serious empty-nest syndrome since Ginny went to Hogwarts. It's different having to care for such a young child, isn't it?" Bill asked, really curious. Fleur had started talking about plans for the future, marriage, children. It was all still pretty abstract for Bill. Until he had met Fleur, his career and the challenges of curse-breaking had been his main focus. Thinking about a future family of his own was... baffling.

They stepped through the doors out onto the stairs and slowly walked down to the street. People were hurrying up and down from one shop to the other. It wasn't exactly freezing cold any more, but still not pleasant enough to linger. At least it didn't rain today.

Bill turned towards the entrance of Knockturn Alley, where a small pub was located that was frequently visited by the human employees of Gringotts. The meals were simple, but tasty and affordable, and the pub was only a short walk away and still near enough to Diagon Alley that the clientele wasn't too dubious.

"Harry certainly was different. Older for one. Able to entertain himself," Marvolo answered at last, a scarf slung around his neck against the chill. "And he had learned with his previous guardians to not draw attention to himself. That he feared for his safety, not without cause, certainly added to his reluctance to interact with me." They were silent while they turned into Knockturn Alley and walked down the uneven cobblestone paving.

"The note you sent me was short and unexpected." Bill changed the topic when they entered the pub, and he looked around for an empty table, spotting one in a corner, near the back exit. He moved to sit there.

"I'm sorry that I cancelled the date so suddenly. But it really is hard to find enough time to prepare everything properly." They shed their outer layers and sat down at the table. "And I was thinking, rituals are performed on those specific dates for several reasons." Bill nodded, that was common knowledge even after all the time the Ministry and society had shunned rituals. "One is that the days help boost the power of those performing the rituals, making big workings easier for everyone. But I don't need a power-boost to perform this specific ritual. The boost might even have been part of the troubles I had." Marvolo shrugged and looked over to the blackboard listing the menu choices of the day. "How is the chicken broth?"

"I had it a few times. It's well-made but simple," Bill answered while his mind worked on all the reasons the quarter points of the year were considered good times to perform rituals. "And what of the stabilisation? I've seen the circle you've created. That's rather complex, it can't hurt to have a little help for the stability. I'm not really sure what might happen if the ritual was to go wrong." Marvolo only hummed.

"What can I bring you two lads today?" A witch in old-fashioned, threadbare, and revealing robes asked. She was of middle age – probably – and always here when Bill came in for lunch.
"The chicken broth and bread for me please," Marvolo answered, giving her a charming smile, looking totally out of place in the shabby pub in his fine robes. His everyday robes nonetheless.

"I'll take the curry," Bill decided. It usually wasn't as spicy as he preferred, but it was a big portion and he was hungry.

They talked about unimportant things until the food was brought, only too aware that even in Knockturn Alley there were people listening in and listening more closely when the word ritual was used. Once the food was there, a wave of the iconic pale wand under the worn table erected a one-way silencing ward around them.

"I want to test the theory if a less powerful day might be of benefit for this ritual." Marvolo started to explain his reasoning between two spoonfuls of soup. "This is good."

"You know that testing too many variables at the same time is prone to give mixed results?" Bill asked, breaking a piece of bread off from the chunk they had been given. "You've changed a lot in the ritual itself. Changing the point in time this significantly as well… that might change too much for you to be able to draw significant conclusions. If further changes come up, you may go in the wrong direction."

Marvolo nodded, taking a piece of bread himself. "It's not as if I had unlimited tries free, Bill. And the only negative repercussions of the ritual not working as it is designed will be the piece returning uncontrolled. I already endured that a few times now. I think I can do so again." The older wizard tried to dismiss the real impact of those occurrences, but Bill remembered. He remembered what Marvolo had told him he wanted to avoid with the redesign of the ritual, how he had feared the debilitating pain might cause him to mess up dangerously.

"Maybe the fact that there are still more pieces around," Bill didn't know how many exactly, but he knew that the one to be used in the next ritual wasn't the last, "is the reason you could withstand and survive the pain. What if that changes, the fewer there are?" Bill wasn't sure if he should mention it, but with two children dependent on Marvolo, it was more important for him to stay alive.

A sigh was, for a moment, the only answer. A few minutes later, their meals half eaten, Marvolo finally spoke again. "I have arranged for Harry and Marcus to spend a part of the spring holidays with Harry's godfather, Black. I hope to find the time needed for the ritual then. With both of them cared for, I can dedicate time to preparation and to recovering. I had hoped you'd still be willing to help with the ritual."

Bill nodded and swallowed quickly. "Of course I'm still willing to help. Harry is happier than ever, my siblings tell me. And Marcus needs his family." He didn't need to voice his interest in the mechanics of the ritual itself, or the concept of horcruxes – as repulsed as he was by the creation of them, he still was curious as to how and why they worked – Marvolo knew about Bill's academic interests anyway.

"I realise that. It's one of the reasons why I have decided to get more help than just a healer. Which day would suit you?"

They arranged a date and parted ways just outside the white marble building of Gringotts. Bill was deep in thought as he returned to his workplace, opting to fetch himself a mug of coffee before starting to lift curses from more heirlooms. Working on curses while distracted was a receipt for disaster.

Were his mother's fears founded on something else than prejudice? Bill couldn't deny his interest
in curses, ancient and dangerous magic. Others had been consumed by the darkness, had lost themselves. While Bill was confident that his family and friends, and the fact that he didn't like to see others in pain, would keep him safe, there still lingered a trace of doubt.

Maybe talking with Fleur would help.

Chapter End Notes

There wasn't planned all that much in plot for this part of the story, but there still was enough to show that I didn't want to just jump over development and information in a few sentences. I hope this solution (showing snapshots of moments from the whole month) works well.

I'm still not sure how many more chapters I'll need to manage the whole way to the intended end of the story. But I'll guess we'll have to wait and see ;)

Thanks to you all for going on this journey together with me.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Monday, 1st of April 1996

The moment Harry spotted the twins already sitting at the Gryffindor table as he walked in unusually early on this Monday morning. Dreams with Luna and himself in starring roles had woken him too early, but close enough to his normal time that he just had known getting back to sleep would result in his being tired and irritable all day.

Why were Fred and George already here?

On his way to the Slytherin table – still rather empty – Harry was spotted by one of the twins, who elbowed the other to get his attention. With big grins the twins saluted in Harry's direction, making him feel even more wary. Today was the first of April. There was no way that the twins hadn't planned something.

Sitting down at the table so he could keep an eye on the two, Harry took a good look at all the food already on the table. If the twins had managed to be here at the start of breakfast, they would have had enough time to contaminate all tables with whatever prank they had planned to execute.

He had to concede that it was a good idea to use this day for promotion of their products. But he really wasn't sure if he wanted to sample whatever product they had put in the food. Or into one of the many different drinks. Maybe into the pumpkin juice, the milk, one of the tea blends, or the coffee which usually stood near where the older students were likely to sit.

With a sigh Harry started to fill his plate, following the rumbling prompting of his stomach. He was too hungry to forego food in the hope of avoiding being pranked. Especially as the prank might be on the bench and triggered by a certain event, or time delay.

He rolled his eyes as he got a thumbs up from the twins. Really, why hadn't they told him beforehand? They should know by now that he wouldn't tell on them, and as their silent partner he felt they could have given him a heads-up.

Slowly the Great Hall filled with sleepy students, hyperactive first-years, and the members of the faculty. Harry ate his breakfast slowly, keeping an eye out for possible signs on all the others now
starting their morning meal.

Sipping on his cold milk – he had learned to like it during the time he had been more or less forced to consume it regularly – Harry witnessed how Professor Sinistra suddenly reached with her arm across the whole table, exclaiming in surprise. In fact a lot of the people seeing this exclaimed in surprise, right along with Professor Flitwick, who vanished a wave of hot tea spilling from the teapot the Astronomy Professor had knocked over.

After that, more and more people developed a tendency for extra elastic arms and legs. A few of the more experimentally inclined Ravenclaws – incidentally those who tended to be down for breakfast early – started to walk through the hall, their legs lengthening and shrinking in a way that made their way from one end to the other a sight to see.

The changes only held a few minutes, and by the time Harry's arm shot out towards the ceiling as he stretched out his back, Professor Sinistra was watching, amused, as Professor Flitwick used his new-found flexibility to prance around the front of the hall, gleefully changing his height.

Harry was pretty sure that he saw the moment the effects kicked in for Professor Snape, because the man suddenly stopped all movement for several moments. Harry chuckled and nudged Theo, who was sitting next to him, eagerly awaiting the time the effect would kick in for him, to get his friend's attention. "Do you think we could stage a small incident that would draw the professor here? I would love to see him deal with flexible limbs."

Theo chuckled as well, flexing his arm almost absent-mindedly. "I'm pretty sure that would land us in detention. Not worth it. Especially as I'm sure he would manage to move even more menacingly than usual."

Harry nodded, carefully testing to see if his arms were back to normal. He wanted to take another drink from his goblet, but didn't dare risk spilling it all. "True enough. This is pretty funny." His arm reached for the goblet and instead shot out to Draco, who was talking with Pansy. On a whim Harry ruffled the other's hair, eliciting an indignant "Hey!" from the blond and laughter from the rest of the Slytherins sitting near enough to see.

Once the start of the first lesson for the day drew nearer, students started to leave the Great Hall. Harry and his friends were in an excellent mood, the others going on without their friend when the twins came up to their group from the lion's table.

"Fred, George, well done," Harry praised, a big grin on his face.

"I would bow if I had any idea what you're talking about, favourite Slytherin," the twin on the right said, grinning from one ear to the other.

Of course they wouldn't openly admit to what they had done. Harry shook his head in amusement. "Can we look forward to more of such situations?"

"Maybe, little Slytherin, maybe," the other twin answered, clapping his hand on Harry's shoulder as they moved him along into the entrance hall. "Where do you need to go?" Harry rolled his eyes at them, wondering how they had learned of his father's decree that Harry wasn't to go anywhere in the school on his own.

"The owlery. I want to send a drawing of the common room to Marcus. He made me promise. And Hedwig certainly will be happy to get something to do."

"Then we'll make sure that you reach your destination safely, little Slytherin."
Harry huffed but didn't protest. Even though there hadn't been anything resembling an attack, he just knew that it was only a matter of time. There would probably always be someone around who saw him as an easy way to get at Marvolo, to hurt him, or take revenge. That Mr. Diggory seemed to wait – for what Harry just didn't know – somehow reminded Harry of all the other years he had been here at Hogwarts. Whatever mystery they had tried to puzzle out each year, the culmination of it had taken place near the exam season.

Hopefully Mr. Diggory would find another way to deal with his grief than attacking a teenager, and the stressful situation Harry would have to face this year would only be his OWL exams.

One could do nothing but hope.

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Filius was still chuckling to himself over the prank the Weasley twins had played on them all this morning. They certainly had a flare for the dramatic and an ingenious inventive spirit. As a teacher he was proud that they had taken what he had taught them and worked to make something all their own from it.

From what he had seen so far of all the products the boys had spread all through the school, they had applied lots of potions and charms knowledge to their inventions.

He stepped from his office over to the classroom, mentally going through the lesson he was to teach today in the first period of the day.

It didn't take long for the students to arrive before his classroom door, talking animatedly about their experience with the super elastic arms and legs they had had for a few minutes. Then the first students stepped through the door into the room and turned green. Their hair was green, their clothes were green, their skin was green. Not all the same shade, but certainly not natural.

Filius was out of his chair and halfway across the room before the girl who had stepped into the room first noticed what had happened. With a flick of his wand Filius cast a quick diagnostic at the girl and learned that she had been turned green by a simple colour changing charm. Nothing harmful.

His next spell was aimed at the door and highlighted a small line of what looked a lot like spell-o-tape sticking to both sides and the top of the door frame. Once again the ability of the twins to apply original concepts to long known spells was surprising.

"Come in, come in! And please ignore the change in colour you'll undergo. No reason to get worked up over a little April Fool's prank."

It took longer than usual to get the children to calm down enough so that he could start his lesson. Maybe he should try to remove the tape after this lesson was done. But he had to concede that the fact that each student turned a different colour, or at least a distinctly different shade – there was a raspberry red boy, a fire red girl, and another student in a more strawberry red, as well as a student turned moss green, one leave green, and several students in shades of blue – was impressive, and he would love to see when the colours would start repeating.

While he watched the students practising their charms – making sure none of them would cause some trouble out of boredom, teenage thoughtlessness, or lack of practice – Filius wondered if the other professors would have the same interesting day, with pranks laid out at their doors.

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The weather was nicer here than in London, which made Sirius hopeful that their stay wouldn't be confined to the insides of the house by rain or something. He feared that he or his guests might go crazy if they had no convenient way to avoid each other if necessary.

Remus certainly would call him overly pessimistic, but even though his correspondence with the twins had been regular and friendly, the letters he had exchanged with the girls' mother had been less so.

The woman had a serious issue with men. Or maybe just with Sirius, he wasn't really all that sure. But she certainly seemed to see a threat or challenge to her authority behind everything Sirius wrote. Even a question about what they might want to do while staying together at the Black Summer Cottage had somehow sparked a rant about his trying to con her into something. The fact that she insisted on writing in French, even though he knew perfectly well that she was able to write and speak English just as well as he did, was just another hint that she was less than happy with him.

But she still seemed to want her daughters to get to know their father as long as the twins wished for it.

A veritable conundrum.

"I think you should re-set the wards sometime soon," Bill said right next to Sirius, interrupting the older wizard's line of thought. "They're fine for now, but time and the lack of upkeep haven't been good for their integrity. That there's no real ward stone anywhere on the grounds only adds to the problem."

Sirius turned to the young curse breaker, who had rolled up his robe sleeves as a concession to the much warmer weather here in France, and nodded. Another thing for his list of things to do soon. "Sounds like a good idea. But not before the planned stay. It's only days away now." Bill nodded and Sirius looked over the garden, which looked a lot less like an overgrown jungle. "Any dangerous plants left out here? I think the children might want to fly a little during our stay." Sirius had already bought enough new brooms for everyone just for that purpose.

"I removed everything poisonous or aggressive. There's only harmless stuff left. As a result the little garden near the backdoor is bare now, as is most of the rest. But I'm sure you can put in some nicer plants easily enough." Bill explained, waving a hand in the general direction of where there had been some kind of potions-related bed. "Shall I show you the inside?"

Sirius nodded his assent and followed the red-headed wizard into the cottage, a silent Kreacher following in their wake.

The smell of fresh greens and sun was replaced by one slightly lemony mixed with beeswax. Much better than the dust and mould permeating the whole place before the cleaning had started. The spiderwebs and dust were gone too. A fresh coat of paint covered the wall where it wasn't decorated with carved wood panels.

"Looks so much better already!" Sirius exclaimed almost feeling like praising his elderly elf. The little thing had done a good job, but even after all the changes in the elf's behaviour, Sirius had a hard time accepting that all the malicious actions of the past had been ordered by Walburga – he really didn't think she had earned the title of mother – and not done out of the elf's own free will.

They toured all the rooms on all the floors, Bill showing where he had removed charms work that might be worth redoing again, like the cooling charm on a few of the cupboards in the kitchen, or the charm on the windows facing south that darkened the glass on especially hot and bright days.
And then they reached the bedrooms. "Kreacher, prepare that room over there," Sirius pointed out a room with a mostly blue colour scheme and two beds, "for my godson and his little brother." He turned so he could point out a room across the hall from the one he had just assigned. "That room will be for my daughters. Make sure to put enough towels into both bathrooms." There was a lovely painting of a scene from the Pyrenees on the wall over the desk in that room. "I'll take the master suite at the end of the hall." It was far enough from the rooms he had just selected for the children that the kids shouldn't feel too closely monitored, and on top of that held what passed for ward controls in this house.

"I'll contact someone to plant the garden to look a little nicer. Make sure to fill the pantry, Kreacher, and maybe prepare another room for a guest. I haven't heard back from Olivienne, but it's possible that she will want to be here as well. Once you're finished with that, please take care of upkeep and so on." Sirius waved his hand in the air. He really had no idea what was needed to keep a house clean and in working order. There always had been someone caring for that stuff around him. Or it hadn't been taken care of at all.

When the elf had popped out – presumably to clean something – Sirius turned to Bill. "You did a great job! Let's go down to the dining room and sort out the payment for all your work."

They walked down the stairs – with a new carpet put down on them – and into the dining room, where Sirius got out a small inkwell and a quill and took the payment slip attached to an invoice copy from Bill. He felt his hands shaking.

Not because it was a high sum that had built up over the cleaning effort – he had expected that, and the price was more than fair – but because this meant that it wasn't long until he would meet with his daughters for the first time.

He knew they still had to conduct a more conclusive test than looking at an ancient, just recently repaired, family tapestry, to make sure the two girls really were his daughters, and he feared the result.

Which was silly.

But still true.

Not even taking into account that this might all go to hell in a handbasket anyway because the girls didn't like him, or their mother suddenly decided to not allow them contact.

There was so much that could go wrong!

"Sirius? You all right?" Bill asked concerned, stuffing the signed invoice into one of his pockets. "You look like you just walked through a ghost."

Sirius took a deep breath and forced a smile on his face. "I will be. This is all pretty nerve-wracking, to be honest. But I'll be fine." And maybe if he repeated that enough times, he would start believing it.

Bill took the step separating them and clapped his hand – a surprisingly large one – on Sirius' shoulder in a show of support. "I imagine it would be. If I can help in any way…" Bill let his offer trail off, shrugging and obviously not sure what he could do to help, but willing to try if Sirius knew of something.

"Thanks to you I have a place to meet the girls that isn't Grimmauld Place. You already helped a lot." Sirius returned the gesture of a hand placed on the shoulder getting to feel the well developed
musculature under those robes. The curse-breaker certainly was not bad-looking.

Before Sirius managed to ask the question lingering on the tip of his tongue – it had been a while since Sirius had been in one of the London clubs – Bill laughed and shook his head. "I'm claimed, and happy to be."

Now it was Sirius' turn to grin. That really wasn't much of a surprise. But there was nothing to gain if one didn't take a risk now and then. "She's a lucky woman. Thanks again for your help, and now go!" He gave Bill a little shove and already started to plan what else he could do while he was here before he had to return to London.

"If you have more dangerous places to clean, let me know!" Bill cried on his way out of the house, eliciting another round of laughter from Sirius.

The biggest part of the preparations were done, now on to the myriad of small tasks still to be done before he could welcome his guests here.

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Amos stood in the door to his office, watching with impotent rage as boxes of files and furniture were levitated out of the room that until now had housed the Werewolf Registration Office.

After the idiotic decision by the Wizengamot, now was the day that the office was moved. Fitting that this was the day of April's fools. Moving the office over to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, was there a more useless way to organise the monitoring of dangerous wizard killers?

Through the bustle of Aurors levitating the inventory of the office, Amos could see Lord Slytherin standing next to Madame Bones, talking. It seemed the dark wizard had managed to corrupt the witch Amos had thought of as fair and staunchly light before now. But somehow she now was on friendly terms with the Evil who had caused his beloved son's death. She even had accepted the position as godmother to the poor child that had been adopted by he-who-must-not-be-named. But considering that the boy spoke to snakes as well, all the help he had tried to provide had been in vain anyway.

Curious as to what the evil wizard and Madame Bones were talking about, Amos tried to find a way to listen in. He was pretty sure casting a charm that would help him hear over the distance between them would gain their attention, as would moving to stand closer to them if he had no good reason to do so. And even if he spotted someone he could talk to near them, they probably would change their topic if they spotted him.

Should he try to disillusion himself?

Before Amos could come to a decision on how to proceed, the Minister and several Aurors stepped into the main area of the department, looking around as if in search for something or someone.

Amos watched from his office as the Minister – spineless coward that he was – jovially greeted the evil bastard of a dark Wizard and Bones. How he longed to get his wand out and cast a few choice curses at the lot of them. But as he was seriously outnumbered, and sadly not ruthless enough to match the willingness to use dark magic that Slytherin possessed, he knew better than to risk it.

"Look at this." A parchment was pushed into Amos' hand and he briefly flicked his gaze over to Neil, who was scowling in a way that probably could curdle milk if he wanted to.

One look at the official-looking letter in its standard Ministry script – obviously written by one of
the many enchanted quills used for form letters – and Amos had a bad feeling. A few moments
later he had finished the appallingly short missive and found his bad feeling confirmed. In polite
but cold words the letter said that with the shift in administration of the Werewolf Registry, his
position had been cut and he was basically fired. Of course he was offered another position, paying
less and not at all related to his previous position, but he only had the rest of the week to decide,
and would only receive pay until the end of the month if he declined.

"That's a disgrace!" Amos exclaimed, keeping his voice low enough that the hustle and bustle of
the move covered his shout. "Do you know who'll take over your position now?"

Neil shook his head. "No. Haven't talked with any of the Aurors yet. But I guess one of the older
Aurors no longer able to do work in the field? Or maybe a trainee?" Neil obviously was bitter, and
probably worried where he should find work with enough pay to keep up the lifestyle he and his
wife had become accustomed to.

"I'll see what I can do," Amos promised, folding the letter back up so Neil could store it in his robe
pocket. He had no idea how he would do so, or where to start, but he couldn't leave one of his
closest allies out in the cold in a situation as dire as this.

Amos looked up and around, searching in his mind for a good place to start looking for a better
position for Neil. While he surveyed the room, he suddenly made eye contact with Slytherin across
the room. There was a deep calm on that face, and a smirk so faint that Amos wasn't sure he hadn't
imagined it. But he suddenly was very sure that this firing had been the man's doing. How the evil
wizard had known to target Neil in the first place, Amos didn't know, nor had he any evidence. But
he would have bet all his galleons that this was somehow Slytherin's doing.

"We're looking for Albert Thomas!" one of the Aurors who had come in together with the Minister
called out, getting everyone's attention, which led to everyone's stopping what they had been doing,
looking around in search of Albert. The dread in the pit of Amos' stomach was getting stronger.

"How may I help you?" Albert asked, stepping out from behind one of the tall filing cabinets, a
folder of parchment scraps under one arm.

Suddenly several wands were trained on Albert, and Amos felt himself tense. What was that about?

"You're under investigation for accepting bribes. You'll come with us quietly and are suspended
from your duties for the time being, Mr. Thomas," the Auror who had spoken first stated with
authority.

All around the room chatter and murmurs rose, and Amos just knew that they had started to gossip
and this would make the rounds of the Ministry by evening, if not earlier. Another plot to
undermine his base, Amos was sure of it.

He had to concede that Slytherin knew what he was doing here. Amos was pretty sure he wouldn't
find any traces back to Slytherin. And he hadn't even caused anything that would be considered
illegal. After all, Albert had taken money, goods, and favours in exchange for speeding up the
process of gaining a license, or even for avoiding the regulation checks that theoretically were
needed before one was allowed to start a crup breeding program.

And so Amos watched with growing anger and desperation as Albert set down the folder of
documents on the filing cabinet, and handed over his wand to the Aurors, then followed behind
them out of the department. Just a moment later Amos saw one of the biggest gossips of the
Department slip out through the door, probably to be one of the first to inform others of what had
happened here today.
"I'll have to inform my wife of this," Neil murmured next to Amos, not really paying attention to anything outside his own misery, barely waiting for an acknowledgement by Amos before he walked away.

Watching in impotent rage as a laughing Minister walked out after the last levitated boxes, speaking with Madame Bones and Slytherin, Amos started serious plotting. He needed to find a way to get rid of the evil wizard. But he needed to be careful. Dolores hadn't been able to keep herself safe, and now was as good as dead, her empty shell just withering away after she had received the Dementor's Kiss. Even the great Albus Dumbledore somehow had fallen from his position of power, through an evil scheme Amos hadn't been able to uncover yet.

No, he had to be extra careful. It was only too possible that he already had managed to get himself onto the list of people Slytherin was determined to get rid of. Even if he couldn't quite fathom how that might have happened.

Even though his political goals had been countered, both in the adoption procedures and the werewolf laws, Amos was sure he had covered his tracks adequately.

Retreating back into his office, to pretend to fill out some paperwork, Amos searched for a way to sway the public opinion against Slytherin and his foolish law changes.

oooOOooo

Severus sat down in his favourite chair in the staff room, once again wishing he could instead be down in their quarters working on the test protocols for their ancestry potion, and preparations for two more couples who wished to have a biological child together with help of the two-fathers potion.

But the Weasley twins had managed to cause a staff meeting once again with their penchant for pranks. While he waited for all the others to arrive, Severus thought back to all the other instances of excessive pranking the horror twins had brought over the school. If there was one redeeming quality to the twins' pranks it was – beside the effort and knowledge that had gone into creating the newest ones – that they targeted everyone the same and usually had pranks that were funny in a non-humiliating way. They had retaliated in the past, and poked too much fun of Mr. Filch in general, but they were worlds better than other so-called pranksters Severus could name.

Minerva finally arrived as the last member of staff, looking harried and out of breath. "Please excuse my tardiness. I ran into Peeves putting bubblegum into door locks." She sighed, made her way over to the chair previously used by Albus, and sat down.

"I gather from the lack of actual complaints from any of you, that the different... let's call them surprises, weren't that disruptive?" She looked around the room and all of them sitting there, clearly tired after a long day of teaching, a question clear on her face.

Most just gave a shake of their head, or a murmur of some indifferent agreement that it hadn't been as bad as it could have been, which didn't seem to satisfy Minerva, who turned a little so she could speak Severus with a mild glare. "You were suspiciously calm during breakfast. And I expected to hear a complaint from you, see Gryffindor with a heavy points loss, or the Messers Weasley in detention. Why did nothing of that sort happen, Severus?"

Severus snorted. "We were informed this morning, via elf, that there would be a potion and spell-based prank during breakfast and that it had been ensured that Sonja would remain unaffected." A murmur went through his colleagues. It seemed that they still thought him a humourless man, they really weren't paying enough attention. "And the prank placed on my classroom involved everyone
only being able to speak in a whisper, or in rhymes, which did nothing to disrupt my class. There was no need to report the prank as it wasn't disruptive. In fact I feel I might ask for that prank to apply it permanently to my classroom door."

And he wasn't really joking. It had been a rather pleasant day with all the students either speaking too low to be heard or speaking in rhymes.

One after the other the professors talked about what their doors had done to students on their entering each of the classrooms, just to reverse the effects on their way out of the classroom. Filius in particular was gushing over the charms work he had seen this day.

In the end Minerva closed the discussion with a faint frown on her face. "It seems as if no one was harmed by any of the pranks today. There were safety measures in place, the pranks were not really disruptive to any of the lessons, and not one of them was permanent." She took her glasses from her nose, carefully rubbing with one hand over her closed eyes. "I'm not sure if and when, or what we should do to punish the perpetrators."

Severus cleared his throat, everyone turned around to look at him. "I'm not sure if everyone is aware of this, but I have no conclusive evidence on who exactly is the perpetrator behind the pranks we have seen today. Or did I miss something?"

Stunned silence fell over the room, and then Filius laughed out loud, slapping his hand on the table in an expression of glee and approval. "Severus has a point. I'm pretty sure I know who did it, but I have no proof. And not one of you has provided anything that I would deem enough to put a punishment on a student. Do you disagree?"

For a moment there was silence again and than some of the newer – temporary – members of staff tried to find arguments to punish the Weasley twins. But in the end, based on a severe lack of evidence, no one was punished for the day of pranks Hogwarts had gone through today.

oooOOooo

Wednesday, 3rd of April 1996

Dora sat at her desk in the big office space of the Auror Department, just finishing off a report on a break-in into a tea shop on Diagon Alley the previous day, when one of the younger aides led a wizard of middle age and in expensive robes of a modern cut to her desk. "Auror Tonks, Mr. Cuffe here wants to report an incident." The young aide pointed at the wizard at his side before nodding to both of them, then leave again.

"Please take a seat, Mr. Cuffe," Dora said, giving the man a formal nod while moving her current work to the side. "How may I help the Chief Editor of the Daily Prophet today?" More often than not, a case involving the Daily Prophet had its roots in someone coming in to complain about something the newspaper had written. Had someone taken out their frustration with the most widespread publication in their society by vandalising the building?

"Thank you, Auror Tonks." The wizard accepted her offer of a seat and made himself comfortable in the chair next to her desk. "I'm not sure if I'm here to report on a curious anomaly or file a report on attempted murder, if I'm being honest."

That proclamation had Dora sitting forward in her chair, getting a new blank form for a report and her quill to take notes. "What a curious statement. What happened that you're not sure what it was?"
Mr. Cuffe got a piece of parchment out of his pocket, and smoothed it out before answering Dora's question. "It's pretty normal for howlers to arrive in our post room. That's why it's specifically warded to prevent fires from starting, other mail from being destroyed by them, or other nasty things from happening." He waved the hand not holding the parchment lazily from side to side. "But today hundreds of howlers arrived at the same time!" Dora felt one brow creep up towards her curly pink hair in surprise. There hadn't been anything that controversial in the newspaper today. "Here's a write-up of the statistics for the whole last week." He offered her the slightly wrinkled parchment, which Dora accepted to look at and add to the report.

"You keep statistics of the number of howlers?" It seemed rather pointless.

As if embarrassed Mr. Cuffe chuckled. "There is a betting pool going almost constantly in the office. You know, which day will be the one with the most or least howlers, that kind of thing. We even have recording spells linked to enchanted quills set up, so that we can read what was send without all the noise."

It was interesting to see how widespread the betting on seemingly silly stuff was. But that really was only a side note. "So you can tell me what had someone, or more than one person, sending you that many howlers?"

But before Dora had finished her question Mr. Cuffe already was shaking his head in denial. "Sadly no, Auror Tonks. The recordings are illegible. Partially because the parchment was rendered to mere particles by the force of the quills. The charms clearly weren't set up to take that much input at one time." He sighed. "So far that's a curious incident, especially as we had to put the results of a bakery competition on the front page this morning." He spread his hands out as if to indicate that he couldn't see who would take exception to something as harmless as that. "But if someone had been there in that room when all those howlers went off, they might have been seriously harmed. And if we didn't have such a room in the first place, they would have been delivered to me. And no one dared speculate what that number of howlers would have done outside of a warded room."

Dora nodded. It seemed reasonable to assume that the Prophet kept track of the addressees of mail coming into the building. "So you say this might have been a plot to murder you through the excessive use of explosive letters?"

Mr. Cuffe nodded. "I'm not sure what to think, but that particular thought did cross my mind."

Dora started to take all the information down that the form required – name of the one reporting the incident, what happened, where, when, etc. – while thinking through the possible motives to send so many howlers. Besides objecting to something that had been reported, and how it had been reported, there also was the possibility that someone thought the Prophet should have reported something that they had ignored. Sadly, that opened up a plethora of possibilities, including happenings that could be imaginary, or of such insignificance that Dora had no way of knowing of them.

"Please keep an eye out for more howler avalanches. Maybe a warding expert, or Charms Master can help you adjust the charms work, so we can get a bit more information on the content of the howler if this should happen again?" Dora advised the Chief Editor after they had finished the paperwork.

He nodded in agreement. "We've already contacted some of the experts we had set up the wards and charms in the first place."

In fact Dora wasn't surprised by that, so she only nodded before continuing. "In the meantime I'll
investigate what's needed to record and deliver that many howlers. At the moment, I'm unsure if one person can even create that many howlers without leaving a trace." Dora herself never had sent any howlers, and hadn't really received any up till now. She thought there was some specific parchment needed, as well as a charm, if she wasn't mistaken. But she would have to look it up. Maybe she could get a lead on the perpetrator by checking who had bought lots of the needed supplies in the last few days. Could one make the special parchment at home?

She went to inform the Head of the Aurors about the new case and that she would take it up, all the while thinking about ways to locate, hopefully, the one sending too many howlers.

oooOOooo

*Friday, 5th of April 1996*

The compartment they had settled down in was filled completely. All of the places were occupied. Harry felt kind of bubbly and excited where he sat next to the window, Luna leaning close to him, her head resting on his shoulder, book held in her hand.

Daphne and Pansy sat next to the sliding door, a game of chess going on. It was their third one, chess pieces smashing each other to bits quite regularly. Harry had a feeling the two girls were playing with the intention to capture as many pieces as they could, even if there was a better path to actually win the game.

Crab and Goyle were both deeply entrenched in quidditch magazines, not paying any of them any mind, which left Theo and Harry to listen to Draco who was talking almost without pause by now.

"It's almost surreal that I might be an older brother by the time we return for the rest of the school year after the holidays!" It was not the first time that Draco had said something along those lines since he had returned from patrolling the train. And it probably wouldn't be the last time. Theo rolled his eyes, and Harry had trouble keeping the laughter from bubbling out of himself. That he looked forward to a holiday with his own little brother visiting his godfather in France didn't exactly help matters.

"I have to say, though, that I'm not really happy that my parents haven't told me before now that mother had to stay on bedrest for these last weeks. Weeks! Can you imagine that? I think I would get restless after just one day on bedrest."

Once again Theo rolled his eyes. "Do you know if you'll get a brother or a sister?" In an attempt to get Draco to talk about things less dangerous – neither Harry nor Theo really wanted to know the medical reasons behind the need for bedrest – and potentially more interesting.

Draco shook his head, not a hair on it moving out of place. "If my parents know, they haven't told me. But seeing as I'm that much older it doesn't really make a difference. I'll be grown and of age long before my little sibling starts at Hogwarts or gets interested in Quidditch or… gobstones, or whatever."

"Marcus told me yesterday that he wants to learn to swim. I had a hard time trying to explain that the water might not be warm enough this time of year. Even in France. I don't think I managed to convince him. He kept bringing up warming charms." Harry grinned. Maybe they actually would get to swim in a lake or something if Sirius was willing to cast warming charms on them.

"Father wrote me that he bought a broom for Aiden. It might seem silly, but I really look forward to showing him how to fly." Theo smiled a little wider than he usually would. "Maybe we can arrange to meet, I mean all of us, little brothers included, to go flying?"
"We could do that." Draco said nodding and then a gleam entered his pale eyes, setting Harry a little on edge. "And Theo, any plans to meet up with that little red-head of yours?"

Theo gave Draco an unimpressed glare to that pretty transparent jab at the slowly developing relationship between him and Ginny. "If you had paid at least a bit of attention to what was going on the last few days, you would know that Ginny and all her brothers have opted to stay at the castle during the holidays. As has Hermione. Revising. I'm sure most of us would have done something similar if not for family obligations."

Harry nodded. "I certainly would have thought about staying at Hogwarts." He didn't want to contemplate that it wouldn't really have been a topic of contemplation before Marvolo had adopted him this past summer. "But with Sirius meeting his daughters, and Marcus now living with us, there wasn't a chance I would stay behind willingly."

"I hope to get enough revision in with the many events mother and father have planned for me to attend," Daphne said from where she watched with glee one of her knights pulverising one of Pansy's bishops on the hovering board between them.

"I'm sure you'll manage." Harry said, trying to sound reassuring. All of the older Slytherins knew that Daphne's parents were insisting that she find a suitable match soon, not that Harry felt it was necessarily a good idea to force her to pick someone this early. And narrowed down to old magical families. Maybe they should consider the possibility of Daphne falling in love with and marrying a muggle-born wizard. It would certainly make it easier to find someone not in line to inherit some old magical estate.

"We'll see," Daphne answered pretty distracted, now watching in dismay one of Pansy's pieces cleaving one of hers in half.

The rest of the ride Draco, Theo, and Harry filled with plans and ideas for things they might do together during the holidays. It worked rather well in keeping Draco away from speculating over the fact his mother was currently bound to stay in bed, and that he would be a big brother soon. It was getting dark by the time they reached London.

ooOoo

Marvolo stood on the platform waiting for the Hogwarts Express, carefully controlling his face. He had to work harder than he was used to to not grin like a loon, because next to him stood Marcus and he was hyped up and almost vibrating with excitement at the prospect of seeing Harry again.

"Stay near, Marcus," Marvolo reminded his son again, because he really didn't want to have to search for him among all the other children and parents waiting to pick up their children from the train. There were people everywhere and they all – or at least most of them – were tall enough that a child which just had started school easily could vanish between them all.

Marcus made a sound in reply that could be interpreted as one of agreement, if Marvolo was generous in his interpretation. But as his son was staying close just as Marvolo had asked him to, he didn't press for a more clear answer.

And then there was a whistle, the train arrived, slowing down, and Marvolo had to snatch out his arm, to keep Marcus from running towards the train by catching the little boy by his shoulder. "Stay, Marcus. We don't know where Harry is sitting on the train, and he'll have an easier time finding us if we stay where we said we would stand."

Marcus didn't protest or struggle, he just started to jump up and down in place, clearly unable to
find a place or purpose for all the energy coursing through him. Somehow it was adorable rather than irritating.

The train stopped, the doors opened and students poured out onto the platform. Marcus jumped even faster and higher, chanting something like "Can you see Harry? Where is Harry? Harry is almost here!" the whole time.

And then there was a group of teenagers striding towards them, trunks being dragged behind them – it looked like someone had spelled them with a featherlight charm – smiling and laughing. Marvolo wasn't able to keep Marcus from running towards Harry, impacting with his older brother, enveloping him in a hug. Another short boy was running towards the group, clearly aiming for Benjamin Nott's boy. Together the small children effectively stopped the group of Slytherin students, forcing the others to move around the group. Marvolo felt himself smiling and looked around while Marcus and Harry greeted each other.

There was Lucius talking with his son, already almost on their way home, Benjamin waiting for his two sons just like Marvolo was, smiling slightly with a sad undertone. Lot's of other parents and guardians greeting their children, and students talking to their friends as if it would be ages before they would speak again.

Marvolo himself never had gone back on the train for any holidays but the summers, and the yule holiday was the first time he had seen the platform other than at the beginning or end of summer.

"Hallo, father." Harry's grin and happy attitude startled Marvolo out of his reminiscence, which was very welcome.

"Hallo, Harry." He smiled and cautiously accepted the hug Harry only hesitantly offered. With Marcus around all the time, Marvolo had become accustomed to getting hugs at all times of the day. But even though he and Harry spoke every night, they only had shared hugs on a few occasions. "Let's get home. Flimm was planning a veritable feast to celebrate your return this morning. And Marcus has been wanting to test his broom with you ever since he spotted it."

Harry nodded happily and took a step back. "I'll just quickly say goodbye to Luna, and be right back." And he was gone the few steps over to where Luna Lovegood stood with her father the editor of the Quibbler.

It really was quite the change they all had undergone since the last summer. A few minutes later – much quicker than Marvolo had thought – Harry was back beside them, and Marvolo extracted the Portkey they were to take to get home. It was so much easier to take a portkey than to apparate with two passengers and a trunk.

They vanished in a swirl of colours towards their home, Griffin House.

Chapter End Notes

Seems as if the technical issues are resolved for the moment. But work has been crazy since the start of the year. Writing is a nice way to relax after a long day at work. Thank you all for making it that bit more enjoyable!

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!
New Experiences

Chapter Notes

Library Ghost 01 claimed that my story had reached almost the same length as the Bible... I just had to check that! SO... going by the word count on AO3 (that doesn’t include ANs like this one) with chapter 90 the story reached 722 567 words. o.O There are a lot of different versions and translations of the Bible around, but what is called the “King James Bible” has 783 137 words. That’s pretty close.
Out of curiosity I researched one of the books I have read many times in German and in English that is one of the longest single books I know well. The Lord of the Rings (as a one book edition) which has 481 103 words... I have to admit that I’m quite shocked!
Thank you all for staying with me on this long, long journey!

And as I don’t know how much time I’ll have during the day: here have an early chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, 6th of April 1996

Harry felt like he was floating on a soft, warm cloud. His pillow had the best shape to cradle his head while he was on his stomach in his bed, not really asleep anymore, but not really awake yet, either.

That was how a cat in front of the fire had to be feeling. Totally content in the knowledge that there was no reason to get up and disturb this peaceful state. Harry snuggled into his covers and pillow a little more, relishing the warmth under his blankets. Even with his own room at Hogwarts, Harry didn’t get many opportunities to just enjoy the calm of mind and the relaxed feeling in his body. And back when he had lived at Privet Drive, there never had been an opportunity to sleep in. Even the Burrow with its many inhabitants had made such an occurrence – sleeping in – impossible.

Slowly the delicious scent of warm pancakes filtered into Harry’s half-sleeping brain, as well as an odd mix of muted sounds steadily getting louder.

The next moment the door was opened, and the odd sounds were easily identified as the steps of a small child and a large and heavy snake slithering over sturdy woollen rugs. Harry really didn’t want to wake up, but he wasn’t able to simply ignore the hissing going on in the room. Coming ever nearer.

:.Dad says we’ll have to wait until Harry wakes up before we can go play:. Marcus hissed, carefully tiptoeing over to Harry’s bed. ..:So if I wake him, we can play earlier!:. There was a smug undertone to the hissing as Marcus laid his plan out.

:.I’m sure that wasn’t what Master wanted to say, bubbly hatchling:. another, more female, voice answered.
.::Then why didn’t he say so?:. There was a pout in that question, and suddenly a not insubstantial weight was added to Harry’s legs.

The teenager grumbled unhappily, now a little more awake, turning away from the light streaming in through the door, burrowing his head in his pillow. Maybe he could get that blissfully calm state of being half-asleep back.

.::You just choose to ignore what you did understand, bubbly hatchling:::. That statement was followed by a hissy laugh, and movement from Harry’s legs upwards towards his head.

Some pointy bit of Marcus’ body – an elbow, or knee most likely – managed to hit Harry’s ribs, managing to drag Harry just a bit closer to a state of being awake.

He didn’t want to wake up yet. Harry grumbled again, trying to turn under his blankets, dislodging the smaller person from his perch half on Harry’s side, causing a giggle.

A small, much-too-cold hand caressed Harry’s cheek and then moved to carefully pry open one of Harry’s eyes.

One green eye quickly morphed from sleepily looking up to the much-too-close grinning face, into one glaring at the grinning face. “I want to sleep!” .::It’s too early to get up:::. Harry hadn’t really decided to start out in English, but he really wasn’t completely awake yet.

.::No it’s not!:. Marcus insisted, poking Harry when the teenager closed the one eye again. .::I’ve been up for ages already!::.

.::It’s early still:::. Nagini contradicted Marcus’ claim .::Let the little hatchling rest, bubbly hatchling. He’s soon shedding a skin, he needs his rest::.

Nagini might have had good intentions, but the discussion starting now over what it meant to shed a skin, and why one would need more rest before something like that, only worked to wake Harry further.

Pretty soon he was awake enough to notice the rumbling of his empty stomach and follow the discussion between Nagini and Marcus more easily. It seemed as if Marcus hadn’t been up all that long. Were all children that… bubbly? It certainly was an interesting choice in nickname Nagini had made there.

.::Get off me, Marcus. If I’m to get up and go to have breakfast, I need to get out of bed first:::.

Marcus squealed and Harry flinched when another elbow – or foot? – made contact with his back, as Marcus made haste to leave Harry’s bed.

“I want to play gobstones with you! And exploding snap! And after that we can build a castle! Maybe you can help me build Hogwarts? I’m not sure we’ve enough blocks to build Hogsmeade too, but we could ask Dad to make us more! Have you seen him wave his wand and blocks falling down out of nowhere? It’s sooooo impressive.” Marcus was talking a mile a minute, barely stopping to breathe.

Harry crawled out of bed and only listened with half an ear to his little brother prattling on and on and on. He really would have loved to sleep a bit longer, but somehow he had a feeling that behaviour like this was not that unusual. What had life been like for Bill and Charlie with as many younger siblings as they had? He certainly felt like he might understand Ron’s resentment towards his little sister back in their first two years at Hogwarts better after the holidays were over.
While there was nothing malicious in Marcus and his behaviour, it certainly had the potential to get very annoying very soon. If it hadn’t already crossed the line.

Harry gathered the clothes he wanted to wear today, getting a new pair of socks from his drawer, while Marcus described the small garden they had planned with the other children in his class, and moved out of his room in the direction of the bathroom. When Marcus tried to follow Harry into the bathroom the older boy put his foot down. “You’ll not follow me into the bathroom. Go tell Flimm that I’ll be down for breakfast soon. Or clean up the playroom so we can attempt to build a castle. I’ll take my shower on my own.”

He closed the door and leaned against it taking deep breaths – in the pattern learned under Professor Snape’s instruction for meditation – to calm down. While he listened for the sound of Marcus moving away from the door, Harry contemplated the possibility that these holidays wouldn’t be as relaxing as he had hoped they would be.

Shaking himself to get rid of the gloomy thoughts, Harry started with his morning routine. Once he stood under the warm spray of the shower, he tried to see the situation from different angles, one of the methods Madame Goyle had taught to him, that supposedly made seeing a situation clearly easier.

This all was new for Marcus too, and he was a small child still. Of course he would be excited. Better he was excited in a happy way, demanding Harry’s attention and interaction, than being nervous and hiding away from them all. Once they were with Sirius in his godfather’s house in France there would be a lot of other new things for Marcus to explore and be excited about.

Hopefully.

While working in the hair potion – not much of an improvement for his stubborn hair, but it didn’t sting in the eyes and smelled nice – Harry mused that if he had stayed at Hogwarts he would have been forced to study by Hermione, and would have had to watch the slowly rising panic in all the other students who were preparing for their big exams this year. Experiencing being a big brother was something new, slightly scary, but certainly more fun than even more study sessions.

And wasn’t relaxing, doing something different than usual, one reason to have holidays in the first place?

Still not quite rid of his grumpy mood, Harry went down for breakfast, where Marcus was asking questions about all the different foods from Flimm. “And the marmalade is made how?”

With a smile Harry sat down – murmuring a short greeting to Marvolo – exchanging a small grin with the red-eyed wizard who currently was reading the newspaper and drinking another cup of tea, at his usual place at the table.

Flimm’s enthusiasm in explaining how he worked to create all that they regularly got offered for their various meals, shed a new light on the whole situation. Maybe reminding himself that they all were still learning how to do this whole family thing would help with any annoyed thoughts that certainly would come up now and then during these holidays.

“Please pass the butter?” Harry asked of Marvolo, catching the butter dish once it had been levitated to where he was sitting. “Did you have any plans for us today?”

“No,” Marvolo answered. “I thought we would enjoy a nice day at home before you two need to prepare for your short visit to France.”
Spreading the butter onto a crispy and hot piece of toast – magic was great for keeping them at the ideal just-moments-ago toasted state – Harry nodded slowly. “So there'll be ample time to build Hogwarts and the village out of wooden blocks.” Marcus didn’t notice the topic as he was grilling Flimm on the process of making chips and why they weren’t served more often, replacing the boring potatoes which he didn’t like very much. “Can you show me how to change the colours and shapes of the blocks?” Before the questioning glance Marvolo gave him could make it to actual words Harry hastened to add an explanation. “Marcus wants us to build a model of Hogwarts, but if I remember correctly, the blocks aren’t shaped or coloured in a way that would make it believable. You know?”

Marvolo smirked. “It’s a pretty easy transfiguration. You just need to know what the shape should be like and hold a clear picture of your desired result firmly in your mind. I think you already should know the colour-changing charm? And what about the rule of no magic during holidays?”

Harry scoffed. “You were the one to tell me that the wards around the house and the fact that you’re here as well, disturbs the trace enough that it will not be picked up if I cast anything. So, will you show me?”

Marvolo chuckled, but nodded. “After you have finished breakfast.”

With Marcus happily engaged in his discussion with Flimm, Marvolo reading, and Nagini napping by the fire, Harry had time for a leisurely and delicious breakfast, adding waffles, pancakes, an apple and an orange, as well as a few cups of tea to the toast he had started out with.

Marcus was squealing in delight, running up the stairs, once breakfast had been declared over and the construction of Hogwarts declared the activity of the day.

oooOOooo

“Do you need a hand up?” Severus asked with a smile in his voice, which he still wasn’t really accustomed to, but resigned to hear.

Sonja’s glare was more playful than intimidating. “I’m still capable of moving on my own, love,” she admonished him, carefully gripping the handhold next to the door. A few steps took her up the steps to the door in the side of the train they were about to take. Severus was left to handle their luggage, which was harder without the ability to levitate them, but not as hard as it would have been had he not charmed them before they had left the castle.

Walking behind his wife, Severus enjoyed the view, as Sonja already had shed her warm cloak, carrying it over one arm, and he had a good view of her behind. They both were dressed in the latest Muggle fashion. Really nice maternity wear for Sonja – trousers and a blouse with a soft knit pullover on top – and a suit of the finest wool for Severus.

Once they had decided to travel the muggle way, this change in clothes had become necessary. But as far along as Sonja was by now, portkeys really weren’t an ideal mode of travel and their destination was too far away from Hogwarts for apparation.

“Here’s our compartment.” Sonja said a moment later. She opened the sliding door and walked in.

Severus followed her just a moment later, nodding in greeting to the older lady already sitting near the window. He effortlessly hoisted their luggage into the rack above the seats, before carefully
sitting down next to his wife.

The whole time he felt the judging eyes of the older lady on them. He had learned to feel those gazes early on when he had run around in old, faded clothes, unwashed and underfed, seen as a troublemaker by everyone casting those judging glances.

The watery blue eyes took in Sonja’s obvious state of pregnancy, their expensive clothes, the wedding bands, and Severus’ long hair, which today was carefully braided to be out of his face. He was sure she wasn’t happy with his long hair, but chalked it up to the eccentricities rich people often had.

“On your way to Paris?” she finally asked them before either Severus or Sonja could get out their books and start reading, as they had planned earlier that day.

“No,” Sonja answered with a smile, “We’re travelling to Brussels. And you?” Severus successfully repressed a sigh, he really had no intention of holding a longer conversation with a muggle he didn’t know. He would have preferred to talk with Sonja, discussing their plans for the meeting in Brussels, or how to improve their testing plans. But it seemed his lovely wife had other plans.

“I’m visiting with my son and his wife. They recently became parents for the third time.” The conversation quickly drifted from congratulations towards babies and all that entailed. Severus looked out of the window, noticing that the train started to move, leaving the train station of Folkestone in Kent behind, only listening with one ear to the conversation, convinced that the old Lady wouldn’t think him capable of adding anything worthwhile to the discussion about the best clothes for newborn babies.

“And what’s your husband’s occupation?” she asked finally when her curiosity won out over her need to talk about herself.

“I’m a Professor of Chemistry, and work in the field of pharmaceutics. Currently we are travelling to meet with a peer so my lovely wife and I can discuss the next steps in a research project we have started together, with him.” Potions certainly was a kind of pharmaceutic discipline, and linked to chemistry as well, so this was his usual go-to cover story if he had to talk with a muggle for any length of time.

“Oh!” the old lady exclaimed, obviously delighted to have met someone so interesting on a long, mostly boring journey. “May I ask what you’re working on? A cure for cancer? Or maybe something for those pesky allergies?”

Sonja laughed, making Severus smile almost involuntarily. “Oh, no. Nothing like that. We work on fertility treatments, and other related fields.” She blindly searched for Severus’ hand, grasping it firmly in her own once she had found it. “We could have taken a plane, but I wanted to travel through the Channel Tunnel.” She turned to look out through the window, just seeing the occasional flickers of emergency lights speeding by, and the reflection of light from the other compartments. “It’s such a great feat of engineering.”

After a while Severus gave up on pretending to listen in on their conversation out of interest and got out a book he had charmed, before he had packed it, to look like a novel. The tunnel wasn’t all that long and soon they had a view of the French countryside near Calais.

Severus really was excited to meet with the Dutch Potions Master and pitch their idea for the family connection potion to him. Hopefully he would agree to work together with them on tests on a much bigger scale than they would be able to conduct by themselves. Blocking out the chatter of Sonja and the still-unnamed lady, Severus concentrated on the theory behind various shielding
techniques laid down in eloquent detail in the book Sonja had found for him.


Sunday, 7th of April 1996, Easter

“Sit down and breathe, Sirius!” Remus almost shouted in an attempt to get his friend’s attention. Tomorrow was the day that Harry and the little boy Marcus would arrive, and Sirius had been panicking since waking up in the morning.

Said man only turned in a huff, shaking his head. “But how can I, Remus!? There’s still so much to do! Everything needs to be perfect! Can you imagine what might happen to us if anything went wrong?”

Remus closed his eyes and sighed. Maybe accepting the invitation he had declined for Easter lunch would have been the smarter decision. Sirius not sneering over Lord Slytherin maybe hurting him over nothing, but seemingly agreeing he might deserve a punishment dished out by a powerful wizard was so out of character that Remus really started to worry.

“Come over here and sit down.” Remus did his best to imitate Dorea Potter’s tone when she no longer was joking – it had worked on all of them rather well back when they had been teenagers – and actually broke through the panicked haze Sirius had vanished into earlier.

Getting out a small phial of calming draught from his pocket, Remus handed the potion to his pale friend. “Drink! And then you’ll sit there just breathing for a few moments.”

Sirius accepted the phial, but gave the milky pale lavender liquid a dubious look. “Really, Remus? Drugs?”

Remus huffed. “Used under the right circumstances and in the right dosage, it’s medicine, you dunce.”

Chuckling weakly, Sirius toasted his friend with the phial before knocking back the contents, shuddering at the taste in an exaggerated manner. Remus rolled his eyes at his friend and took a seat opposite of Sirius in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place.

It didn’t take long until Remus witnessed the relaxing effect of the potion, as the tension slowly bled out of Sirius’ shoulders, the worry-lines on his face easing and his breath slowing down. Only then did he start to speak, confident that his friend now would actually be able to listen. “You told me that Bill did a great job making the house safe, and that Kreacher and the firm you hired for the job were finished as well. You have your stuff packed. The portkey that will take us both over to the house is here.” Remus pointed at the small, shiny disk sitting on the kitchen table. “All your possible guests have confirmed that they will come and when they will arrive. I have agreed to help you with the last preparations and entertaining your guests. There really is no reason for you to get so worked up over the whole thing.”

Sirius didn’t open his eyes, still breathing evenly. “You know that my head never really was the one doing most of the thinking, Remus. And quite frankly I’m terrified that something might go wrong with the twins. Writing letters with them lets me feel as if I know them already, but... I
don’t. And what if they don’t like me? Are disappointed? Their mother clearly has a problem with me. What if she's influenced them against me?” With the last question Sirius opened his eyes, fixing grey orbs on his friend, pleading to be told that he was imagining things.

Remus felt for his friend, happy that he had declined the invitation for Easter in favour of staying with him. “Judging by what you've told me, their mother has raised them to be independent. And if you think back to how we were at that age…”, Sirius chuckled at that, “I don’t think you need to fear them being easily influenced by anyone without a grounding in fact.”

“I’m happy that I’ll have you at my side, Moony.” Sirius finally said before getting up from his chair. “Kreacher will bring our trunks, and I think we should use the portkey so you’ll get to see the cottage in the best possible light.” And just like that Sirius once more was the confident wizard, Remus knew him as. But moments just like this were a clear reminder that this, more often than not – at least Remus suspected that was the case – was a front and not reality.

“Sure, I’m quite curious to see what the Black family considered a small vacation home. Will the others arrive by portkey as well?” Even though he knew on which days the two groups of guests would arrive, Remus hadn’t been told about the mode of transportation.

“Enora, Nawel, and their mother, yes. But Lord Slytherin wrote that he knows where the cottage is and will apparate Harry and Marcus there tomorrow. An elf will bring the boys’ luggage.” Once again Sirius took a deep breath and straightened his posture.

Remus walked around the table to stand beside his friend, once again marvelling about how easy it was to move this close to the last full moon. Having a stretch of woods to run in as well as the Wolfsbane potion each month was making a world of difference. That he had had a job paying good money for months now that wasn’t as taxing as teaching a whole school of teenagers, certainly was having an effect as well. If his healer was to be believed, his health had improved markedly since he had accepted the position as history tutor this last summer.

He took hold of the disk Sirius had summoned to his hand with a flick of his wand, and after the activation phrase had been spoken, the two of them were whisked off in a flash of dizzying colours towards France.

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“Mom! Dad! I’m here!” Almost toppling over while trying to take off her boots – her mom wasn’t happy with everyone tracking in dirt – Dora called out to announce her arrival to the inhabitants of the house.

Only moments later – she was hopping on one foot trying to keep her balance – her father came into the hall smiling and happy. “Dora! How glad you could make it! No last-minute orders from your boss?”

Giving her dad a one-armed hug while dropping her second boot near the other, Dora grinned into his shoulder. “No last-minute assignments, luckily. But there’s not really all that much to do anyway. Many Aurors are tasked with the more menial, everyday stuff.”

A delightful scent of roast, and various side dishes Dora had trouble identifying by scent alone, was filling the air, making her smile. “Mom’s in the kitchen?”
“She is,” her father nodded in confirmation, releasing her from his strong embrace. “In fact she threw me out, claiming that the kitchen always looks more like something exploded if I try to help.”

They both shared a laugh, and Dora picked up the chocolate egg filled with various other chocolate figures – spring-themed, the note on the shelf had claimed – she had brought as a gift for Easter from where she had put it before following her father into the living room that had been rearranged to accommodate the dining table.

The sitting room looked cozy. There was a big vase sitting near one of the windows, filled with different young branches just starting to bloom or to sprout leaves. The branches were adorned with little ornaments, quite a few of which Dora had created herself in muggle kindergarten and school before she had started Hogwarts. Little birds, horribly brightly painted eggs, and glass flowers were hanging next to charmed miniature snitches and bunnies moving their ears around. The table was set out for three, and for a moment Dora was a little sad.

She had asked Remus if he would like to come with her to the traditional Easter meal at her parents’ house, but he had declined, citing the need to help Sirius with a last check of the summer home in France.

She suspected that it had been a diversion tactic, simply a way to get out of formally attending a family event as her guest. She had known that it would have been a big thing. Almost like calling them a couple. Or even more than calling them a couple. Maybe she had been a little too bold, asking him. They hadn’t even been on one simply date yet. But all her attempts had been thwarted with the simple argument that she as an Auror, she couldn’t be seen with a known werewolf in a way that could be interpreted as a romantic situation. Maybe she should simply invite him to the cinema.

“Where did you vanish now, Dora?” Her dad suddenly broke her musing, curiosity and a hint of concern in his eyes. His hair – still rather fair and hiding any possible grey ones rather well – was almost falling into his eyes, prompting him to repeatedly push it to the sides. Mom would most likely make him cut it again soon. “Darling?”

She shook her head to clear it of those distracting thoughts, concentrating back at the here and now. “I had asked someone to accompany me today. He declined.” She shrugged, unable to clearly frame her state of mind and emotion in words.

“So have you been with him for a longer time yet? And didn’t tell us?” The raised brow clearly communicated her dad’s scepticism, and Dora couldn’t keep herself from pulling a grimace. “Jumped the wand again, Dora? No wonder he declined your invitation to Easter lunch with your parents.” He laughed at her sour expression, and bent over double when she transformed her face and hair to more closely resemble an elderly witch, sticking her tongue out.

“What has you two this amused?” came her mother’s cultured voice from the doorway, where she just had entered, the food floating in after her on the fine china Ted and Andromeda had gotten as a present from Ted’s parents at their wedding.

“Dora had asked someone to come too. He declined. And judging by her face, she hasn’t really been together with him for long.” Dora was so glad she could control her complexion as her father gave a summary to her mother, otherwise she would have been blushing furiously by now.

Gently placing down the dishes, Andromeda snorted, and gave her daughter a knowing look. “Give the poor bloke a chance, dear. Invite him over for a more ordinary Sunday lunch rather than Easter.” Giving an eye roll, Dora morphed back into her most comfortable form, sitting back in the
chair so she wouldn’t accidentally dip her robes into the food.

“Maybe I’ll try that. Thanks, Mom.” The sarcasm was rather thick and brought grins to both her parents’ faces.

For a few moments the conversation revolved around the food, how good it smelled, what-all had been used in its preparation, and that there was more in the kitchen from almost all the dishes. Once they all had filled their plates with slices of roast, young boiled potatoes, young green beans, caramelized onions, and gravy, conversation turned to other topics.

“Have you heard from your sister in the last few days, Dromeda?” Ted asked between a sip from his red wine and a bite from the beans.

“No. But I guess I’ll hear from her soon enough. She has tried to get me to convince you to ask for an ancestry test at the bank. I fear that’s the reason she has been trying to mend the bridges between us so consistently. And now that she has to stay abed, writing letters is one of the few ways to distract herself. I would have died from boredom if I had had to stay in bed for the last weeks of my pregnancy.”

Dora decided not to comment on that statement, but was curious why her aunt, little that she knew her, was confined to bed. “Were there any serious complications?”

“No, nothing too serious. Bedrest isn’t all that unusual for the later weeks of a pregnancy. Even with magic the strain of carrying all that additional weight can get to be too much.”

Dora only nodded, feeling a little better, knowing that it wasn’t anything really dangerous causing the healer’s order to stay in bed.

“How has work been treating you, Dora?” her father changed the subject, putting more of the beans onto his plate.

“Quite well. I guess you’ve heard about the massive amount of Howlers that were sent to the Daily Prophet a while ago?” Dora asked, waiting for her parents to nod before continuing. “I was tasked with investigating who might have done that and why. Currently I only know that no one has bought the necessary supplies anywhere in Great Britain in the last year. It’s quite the conundrum.”

Ted shook his head, sending his hair flying. “Aren’t the Aurors some dark-wizard-hunting special group? Why were you sent to investigate a prank?”

Dora sighed. Not again. “Dad. The amount of explosive force that was generated that day would have levelled the whole building if not for the special wards. It could be considered a terrorist attack. That certainly should warrant the investigation being conducted by the best, don’t you think?” Her father was too easily assuming that she was being slighted by her colleagues and superiors just because she was a witch. “And then there is the fact that the editor himself, Barnabas Cufle, came into the office to report the incident. You know how it is. The important people get the preferential treatment.” She shrugged, not really comfortable with that part of their society and its mechanics.

Ted huffed, but nodded. Andromeda tilted her head in thought. “I guess you already took into account that someone might have brewed the needed materials themselves?”

Dora nodded, taking a sip from her wine. “Yes. But they don’t really contain anything that couldn’t have been grown in a garden, or is so widely used that bulk purchases are the norm. Haven’t gotten far searching for a motive either. Hopefully my requests to possible supply sources overseas will be
answered soon.”

“Sounds like a reasonable plan,” her mother agreed.

A little desperate to change the topic to something not related to her, Dora turned to her father and asked him a question. “How is your work going, Dad?”

He launched into describing all the troubles his patients had had – he was working as a neighbourhood healer and potions provider for a community of mostly muggle-born witches and wizards and others living at the edges of society – while Dora contemplated how best to snare Remus into a date with her. Going Muggle would probably be her best bet. Besides the age difference between them, the fact that he had been infected with lycanthropy was the other reason he frequently brought up when he tried to convince her that there was someone better waiting for her out there somewhere.

She wasn’t convinced, though. There weren’t many men as scholarly, genuinely kind, and at the same time mischievous out there. Considering the age a wizard and witch could reach, even when afflicted by a curse such as Remus was, the difference in age between them was of no real consequences. Convincing him of that, with his low self-esteem and his realistic outlook on the prejudices in their society, would be the hard part. But Dora hadn’t been a Hufflepuff for nothing. She knew what hard work meant and how to motivate herself when a task seemed too hard ever to get it done. Maybe if she borrowed a little of her mother’s Slytherin cunning she would be able to manage to get Remus to see past all the obstacles he had put between them in his mind.

Getting him to know her better was just the first step. Maybe cousin Sirius would be willing to help her by offering up some information on his friend. Like favourite music, and books. It was worth asking, at least.

oooOoooo

Pacing up and down the hall under the disapproving eyes of several of his ancestors, Draco tried to stay at least outwardly calm. He knew he was failing miserably, but was pretty sure he would get points for trying anyway. It was taxing for his nerves to be outside of the room, not knowing what was happening within. But being outside probably was preferable to being inside. Because did he really want to witness his little sibling being born?

His father hadn’t really looked all that happy when he had followed the Healer inside. In fact he had looked rather more pale than usual.

First Draco had tried to distract himself with homework, fully expecting not to find the time later in the holidays. It hadn’t worked.

Then he had taken out his broom for a flight, only to find himself drifting towards the side of the manor where his mother’s rooms were, hovering near her windows. Once he noticed that, Draco had turned away with a huff, landing and placing the broom back in the broom shed.

He was too restless to concentrate on anything, and unable to sit down for even a few minutes. A totally unreasonable state of being.

The Healer caring for his mother was the best in her field. His father was there as moral support for Mother, and there was nothing he was expected to do to help.
In fact he had been told not to cause any trouble and to occupy himself quietly. Walking the hall was reasonably quiet, Draco reasoned for his own benefit, and he was out of the way. The whole thing was simply infuriating. They had magic! Why should the process of giving birth take so long? He supposed that the healer would have been glad to explain, but Draco wasn’t all that keen to learn more about anatomy than he needed right now. Especially when it was his mother’s anatomy.

With a huff Draco turned once again at the southern end of the hall, rubbing a hand across his face. He really didn’t want to think about what was going on behind the silencing wards. Not now anyway. He knew and hoped that it would be him by his wife’s side sometime in the future and that he would need to know and face his reluctance then, but at the moment he just was the older-brother-to-be, nothing more.

Casting around for another topic to think about, Draco started to walk in the other direction, ignoring the shuffling sounds from the Malfoy ancestors staring down at him from their frames. Theo had spoken of his adopted brother – Aiden – often since the beginning of this year. There had been letters more than once a week. Well, letters might be too generous a term, as they more often than not were pictures of animals, or plants, or some things that weren’t so easily identified. Harry had spoken about Marcus a lot, ever since the Dark Lord and his heir had noticed the boy was a parslemouth as well during the winter festival at Lord Lestrange’s school.

Reaching the other end of the hall, Draco furrowed his brow in thought. There had been an increase in people talking about additions to their families. Either because their mother, an aunt, an older sister or cousin had fallen pregnant, or because the family was thinking about adoption. Even talk among the potions enthusiasts about the two-fathers potion Professor Snape was developing went along the same lines.

It looked like some tension had left their world which had kept many people back from having bigger families. So much had changed since the end of that blasted tournament and its stupid tasks. And so much more was about to happen.

Draco once more passed the door of his mother’s room. At that very moment he was about to change status as the sole heir and child of the Malfoy family. The pressure to continue their family line would no longer lie on his shoulders alone. And he would get to be an older brother. Both Theo and Harry had made plans on what they wanted to do together with their little brothers once they were home for the holidays. Draco knew that it would take some time before his little sibling would do more than sleep, drool, cry, and eat. But once the baby could walk, his little sibling would get so much more interesting.

Pacing up and down, turning at the end of the hall with a huff each time, Draco watched as the sun went down and the moon rose. Some time later one of the elves popped into the hall, wringing its spindly hands. “Young Master needs to eat! Young Master wishes to eat here? Or down in kitchen? Elves made all Young Master’s favourites, we dids!”

Not really having noticed his growing hunger, Draco stopped for a moment in his pacing, looking directly at the elf in the customary tea towel. He hadn’t eaten in hours, and now that he was paying attention he actually felt that he was hungry. And his feet were sore from walking the whole time. This hall had a floor of intricate wooden patterns with a woollen rug in the middle, but walking for hours still was walking for hours.

Looking back toward the still-closed door, Draco came to a decision and turned back to the expectantly waiting elf. “I’ll eat down in the kitchen. Give me a few moments and I’ll be down.” Now that he was paying attention to his body, Draco had a few other things to take care of before
he could sit down more or less comfortably for an evening meal.

Nodding several times, the elf popped out again and Draco walked to the nearest bathroom for a short break.

Carrying in a basket filled with the ingredients needed for the ink, he quickly looked around to see if he had everything needed. It was fortunate that his wife had concentrated on her garden this past summer. Her way to deal with everything that had happened. In consequence there was no need to buy the ingredients in bulk from an Apothecary. Someone surely would have started to ask inconvenient questions.

The basket was deposited on the workbench, a really big cauldron moved over to a firepit and filled with several buckets of clear spring water.

He had been good at potions in school, not mastery good, but good enough to confidently brew the ink needed to create Howlers, and the potion to prepare the parchment, of course. Everyone could buy sets. They weren’t even all that expensive. But in the quantities he needed them, the purchase – even if he was to buy from more than one source – would create too much of a trail. Not a risk worth taking.

A fire was started in the firepit to bring the water in the cauldron to a boil, while he sat to prepare the ingredients in the quantities that he needed.

Later he would soak large bunches of parchment, old and new, in the one potion and charm a couple of quills so they would each use an inkwell filled with the other. Writing one letter would prepare several in parallel as the charmed quills would follow the lead of the one he was using.

It was a tedious process, but it also gave him the opportunity to aim all this rage at someone. And not just anyone. There had been no mention about the avalanche of Howlers he had send to the Prophet, but they had not once placed something as inane as the results of a bakery competition on the front page. In fact they had included articles about foreign policies and happenings over news about the Falcons. Not exactly what he had been aiming for. But a good development nonetheless.

Maybe he would manage to attack his real target next. But first he had to test to see if the charm he had found to disguise his voice was working as he expected it to do.

With a small sinister grin he set to work, writing with jerking motions, the quill making scratching noises on the parchment.

Chapter End Notes

annoying little brother brought to you by: julesa66
Teufel1987, I hope my explanation cleared up why an Auror was tasked with investigating the howler avalanche. I have always thought of the Aurors much like a SWAT team, being brought in as reinforcement for more average police, or working
on murder as well as organised crime cases. So, more like the groups for more violent and extraordinary crimes inside the police than “spies” as you would find in something like CIA or MI5, more in-country stuff and closer to actual police. Not sure if the books actually go much beyond “dark wizard fighters” in the definition of what an Auror is. In the end I think it’s likely that they are a catch-all group for everything that goes beyond the more mundane kind of crimes, like shoplifting, apparating without a license, or misusing muggle artefacts.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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“Do you two have everything?” Marvolo asked, not for the first time. The last two times Marcus and Harry had both had something else to pick up. But now both boys shook their heads, Harry grinning, and Marcus almost jumping up and down where he stood with his cuddly snake toy clutched under one arm. “Then come over here and get a hold on my arm.”

The two obeyed eagerly and soon Marvolo readied himself to apparate the three of them and the small satchels of his boys over to France.

They landed with relative ease, but while Harry only staggered on the gravel path, Marcus was visibly green.

Marvolo carefully lowered the small boy to the ground and crouched down beside him. “Deep, even breaths, Marcus. The dizziness will pass.” Quick steps on the gravel alerted them all to another person coming near, and they looked up to see a lovely little cottage sitting in a newly planted garden, and one tall wizard walking towards them, grinning.

“Harry! You’re here early! I didn’t expect you all to show up on time!” Black called out and more or less manhandled Harry into a hug.

“Sirius! Tone it down a little, you’re squashing me!” Harry exclaimed, laughing.

Marcus climbed to his feet next to Marvolo, prompting him to get up from the ground as well. A little shy all of a sudden, Marcus pressed closer to Marvolo, almost hiding in the folds of his travelling cloak. Smiling down at his younger son, Marvolo placed one hand on the little shoulder. It probably wouldn’t last long. Marvolo had witnessed more than once how Marcus changed from hiding, shy, to enthusiastically taking part in something. It had been the same at the birthday party and at a few play date things – he still had trouble processing that he really had gone socialising with other parents while Marcus played – they had gone to.

Marvolo watched as Black released Harry from his clutches and turned to walk towards where he still was waiting with Marcus plastered to his side.

“Is that a swing, Sirius?” Harry suddenly asked, looking out over the garden behind and around the
Black turned around, halting his advance for a moment, and Marvolo felt Marcus shift at his side, peering out of the cloak folds. “It is. When I had a look at the catalogue with everything in it the firm I hired offered for garden improvements, I spotted some playground equipment, and thought that might actually be a fun addition. Don’t you agree?”

Harry nodded. “It looks much better than the one on the playground in Little Whinging. What do you think, Marcus, do we want to test them?”

It didn’t need more encouragement for Marcus to shout an enthusiastic “Yeah!” and run off to take Harry’s outstretched hand, pulling his older brother along into the garden and over to the swings just visible from where Marvolo was standing.

“Do you need to worry about that munchkin getting into anything dangerous. I made sure all poisonous or dangerous plants were removed before inviting anyone here,” Black explained as he walked over until he came to stop at a respectful conversational distance.

“I know,” Marvolo answered, drawing his eyes away from where he could see Marcus swinging – Harry was old enough to have everything under control – to look at Black and then grin at the other’s dumbfounded expression.

Watching Black trying to cope with that statement, Marvolo didn’t even contemplate explaining anything without being asked to do so. It just was too much fun watching the other wizard flounder in confusion, obviously coming up with some pretty outlandish explanations on his own.

“But I thought… how… weren’t you here sometime in the past?” Black finally asked, one hand conspicuously close to where the man’s wand probably was hidden in a secret pocket in the seam of his trousers.

That question was oh-so-tempting an opportunity to mock Black some more. “Of course I’ve been here in the past. Time travel really is something better avoided.” The stories Marvolo had read in the past had made him treat that branch of magic with much more caution than any other. “But I guess you assume that I must have been here last before losing my body. Am I correct?”

Black nodded, eyes narrowed in suspicion or thought, not easy to tell on the man’s face. Maybe it was a little of both.

“But as I have been helping Bill with cleaning this house up, and a truly delightful endeavour that was, my last visit wasn’t that far back.” Marvolo didn’t bother to keep the amusement out of his voice. It simply was too much fun to tease one of the great pranksters who had tormented poor Severus all through their school years.

“You’ve been helping Bill?” Black almost stuttered that question, quite clearly struggling with the concept of Bill and Marvolo working together.

“I have. It might be a surprise for you, but Bill and I share a fascination with the ways places have been protected with the aid of magic in the past, and how enchantments, curses, and wards deteriorate over time. We’ve had a lot of stimulating discussions. I have asked him for his opinion a few times, as his work with the goblins has given him a different point of view on some things. And he asked me some things. Cleaning out the garden was an unexpected challenge.”

And it had been that. There had been some mutant plant hidden in that garden that they had had to burn with a controlled bit of fiendfyre to get rid of it for good. Marvolo suspected that one of the
Blacks had been into experimental breeding of plants. Another branch of magic where Marvolo agreed with the Ministry on the need for regulation.

Black gave a few slow blinks, before shaking himself like a dog getting rid of water in its pelt.
“Right. I don’t really want to know what you would find to be a challenge, would I? Don’t bother.” Black held a hand up just as Marvolo opened his mouth to launch into a detailed description of the plant had kept growing back, faster and faster, when he had tried to get it to a more manageable size by utilising cutting charms. Riling up people was fun he hadn’t engaged for too long.

“But as you see, I’m aware that both my sons will be safe here. Harry has a mirror he can use to contact me, and I know for a fact that you should be able to send a message via Patronus should the need arise. I’ll be using tomorrow to get a few things done, but on all other days I’ll react quickly should you need me to come here for whatever reason. Any more questions, Lord Black?”

“No. I think Remus and I will be able to handle the two. Harry always has been easy to have around,” Marvolo barely restrained himself from rolling his eyes, as if Black had had a lot of time to spend with Harry, “No reason to suspect that Marcus will be a problem.” At that Marvolo couldn’t help but snort, causing Black to look puzzled again.

Shaking his head lightly, Marvolo waved the other off. “I guess you’ll get an education over the next days then, Black. You might not trust me in general, but trust me in this: a small child like Marcus is a totally different kind of challenge.”

Black looked smug now, seemingly sure of himself and his ability to keep a child just old enough for school entertained and happy, but frowned when Marvolo got his wand out. “Harry knows how to cast Marcus’ favourite nightlight, but I think it would be good if you knew as well. So please pay attention.”

It didn’t take long to teach Black how to cast the sleeping snake curled up that Marcus asked for every evening before going to sleep. But it had Marvolo grinning, remembering how the Aurors had looked once they had learned that the Dark Mark which had inspired so much terror floating over the scenes of Death Eater slaughter in the past war was nothing more than a customized night-light spell.

They both walked over to the garden, where Harry and Marcus both were using the swings, trying to get higher than the other in their attempts, monitored by an amused looking Remus Lupin.

“Dad!” Marcus shouted the moment he spotted Marvolo walking over and let go of the swing at the apex of the movement, floating gracefully through the sky, landing with a soft sound on the grass, seamlessly breaking into a run, ending with enveloping the stunned Marvolo in a hug.

Knowing how important it was to encourage displays of magic at this age, he wrestled his shock and fear into submission, and carefully carded one hand through his son’s hair. “Are you having fun, Marcus?”

“A lot!” was the answer from the smiling boy, looking up to Marvolo, tilting his head back as far as it would go to do so.

“That’s great. I’m sure you, Harry, and Mr. Lupin and Lord Black will have even more fun in the next few days during your holiday. While I will have to work and do all the boring stuff.” Marvolo registered the shock wearing off from the other wizards, and that Remus Lupin had his wand in hand, fast reflexes doing him some good in reacting to unforeseen events.

“Why don’t you stay then?” Marcus wanted to know, tiny arms tightening around Marvolo’s
knees.

“Because I’ll have to do the work. Just as you can’t skip your homework, I can’t skip mine.” That got a knowing nod from Marcus, which was so adorable and funny that Marvolo felt himself smiling again. “But that I have lots of work to do doesn’t mean you have to stay at home. So enjoy your stay with Harry’s godfather. And I’ll call you over the mirror in the evening. All right?”

The hug Harry silently demanded was shorter than the ten Marcus collected before Marvolo managed to depart together, but it confused Black a lot more. With a last look at his sons vanishing inside the cottage to take a look at the room they would be staying in, Marvolo concentrated on the entrance hall of Griffin House and his determination to be there before spinning on the spot.

ooOoo

After the boys had seen their room and put down a few of their things – like that creepy cuddly snake – the four of them trooped down to the garden again. “Do you want to have some ice cream? Or do you want to play some more? I have a life-sized chess set over there!” Sirius pointed to where a board was laid down with intricate mosaic patterns and a wooden shed held the animated pieces. “We could also use it to play draughts. We also have cricket, and a few balls, brooms…”

Remus placed a hand on Sirius’ shoulder effectively stopping him mid-rambling. “How about we all get a bowl of ice cream and while we eat we discuss what we might want to play after that,” he suggested calmly.

Sirius took a good look at his guests, seeing the small boy, Marcus, looking a little overwhelmed and Harry giving Sirius concerned looks. Maybe he had lost control there for a little while.

“I like that plan,” Harry decided with a little forced cheer, holding out a hand towards Marcus. “What do you think? Hungry enough for a bowl of ice cream?”

“There’s always room for ice cream!” Marcus exclaimed in such an indignant tone over being asked – as if there was even a question – that Sirius felt himself chuckle. “Do you have chocolate-peppermint-swirl with cherries?”

“Why don’t you and Harry go into the kitchen and ask the elf which flavours we have? It won’t be as big a selection as you get in Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour, but I’m sure you’ll find something you’ll like,” Remus answered the eager question, smiling when both boys ran off, Harry only casting a short worried glance back at Sirius before he followed Marcus into the house.

“He’s a great older brother,” Sirius said, feeling incredibly sad and angry that Harry only got to be an older brother now because ruddy Slytherin had adopted another kid.

“That he is, Padfoot,” Remus agreed, once again placing a hand on Sirius’ shoulder. “And we can’t know how things might have developed differently if that night hadn’t happened the way it did. And there is no point in dwelling on it now. Try to stay in the moment, Sirius. Have fun with Harry and his little brother here and now. And starting tomorrow get to know Enora and Nawel. Concentrate on the future you want to build. Not the past we never had.”

“Right,” Sirius said, once again shaking himself and taking a few deep breaths. Concentrate on the present and the future he wanted to have. He could do that. “Do you know if we have chocolate-peppermint-swirl with cherries? Now that the kid mentioned it, I kind of would like to have some.”
Remus laughed and they started to walk towards the kitchen. “Sometimes I think you might actually be hopeless.”

ooOoo

“And then Remus and Sirius made the chessmen battle!” Marcus almost knocked Harry’s glasses of his nose, he was waving his hands around so animatedly in his description. Just in time Harry dodged another small hand, grinning from ear to ear and trying to hold the mirror somewhat steady so they could see Marvolo and he could see them.

They had both already had changed into their pyjamas, brushed their teeth, and basically were ready to go to bed and sleep.

“We got to eat ice cream! And Sirius said we can fly on a broom around the garden tomorrow if it doesn’t rain.” Marcus was almost bouncing up and down, sitting with outstretched legs on the bed that Harry was going to use.

“Then I’ll hope for you that the weather stays nice, Marcus,” Marvolo said with a smile, his red eyes sparkling with amusement, which had Harry grinning even more. His little brother’s enthusiasm really was inescapable.

“And I see you’re both ready to go to bed? I know it’s almost bedtime for Marcus, but are you really tired already, Harry?” Marvolo asked with a raised brow.

Harry gave him an unimpressed look. “Do you really think this little bundle of energy will let me sleep in tomorrow, father?”

Marcus giggled, poking Harry with one little, pointy finger into the ribs, which provoked Harry to let the mirror drop to the bed, turning on Marcus to tickle him mercilessly. Marcus squirmed on the bed, laughing almost breathlessly after a few moments, under Harry’s relentless fingers until he decided that it was enough. If he didn’t stop, Marcus would be too hyped up to sleep before he got too tired to sleep easily.

While Marcus calmed down, regaining his breath, Harry gathered the mirror back up and sat straighter. A big grin and happy red eyes looked out of the mirror.

“I see that the two of you are having fun. Remember that I’ll be busy the whole day tomorrow, and that I will call you the day after tomorrow during breakfast to hear about your day. Don’t do anything stupid, and have fun.”

For a moment Harry was tempted to ask how one could do both at the same time, but decided against it. He really didn’t want to plant dangerous ideas into Marcus’ head. “We’ll do that.”

“Good night, dad! Cuddle with Nagini for me!” Marcus said into the mirror, leaning so close his nose almost touched the reflective surface.

“Good night, father,” Harry chimed in, actually looking forward to sleeping after a long day playing with Marcus, as being the only focus for his little brother had been exhausting.

“Sleep well you two. And I’ll cuddle with Nagini. With you two gone for now, she probably will insist on sleeping in my bed anyway because it’s warmer.” They all laughed at that, it just was too
true, and ended the mirror call in a good mood.

“Ready to sleep?” a voice asked from the doorway where Remus and Sirius were standing, smiling at them.

“Yes!” Marcus answered, bounding over to his own bed, where his cuddly snake was already waiting for him, her head on the pillow and her body under the duvet, and clambering up the side.

“I certainly am,” Harry agreed, carefully placing the mirror on the bedside table – shiny side down – before slipping under his own duvet, getting comfortable.

Sirius got his wand out. “I was told that you like a little sleeping snake as a nightlight by the door?” His eyes were on Marcus who nodded eagerly. “Then I’ll cast the spell before turning off the lights.” A little murmured incantation, a flick of his wand and there was a little snake curled up right next to the door on a little shelf. Remus turned the light off and with murmured good nights the two adult wizards were gone.

Harry was already half asleep when he felt Marcus climb into his bed, snuggling under his duvet and close to Harry himself. Without hesitation, one of Harry’s arms curled around Marcus and the two of them slept peacefully until the morning.

oooOOooo

Tuesday, 9th of April 1996

Nawel was kicking small stones from where they were sitting on a bench near Gare De Lyon, waiting for their mother to pick them up. Next to them their Professor for Magical Theory was waiting, watching the people going by and obviously entranced by the differences from what they all were used to seeing at Beauxbatons. Even just comparing tourists to people commuting to and from work would provide hours of entertainment.

“Think all will go smoothly?” she asked her sister, doubt evident in her voice. She really wasn’t sure if their mother would make this harder than it needed to be.

“I hope it will, and don’t know why it shouldn’t. Maman wants the best for us. I think she and Lord Black will manage to be sensible adults during this week,” Enora answered, once more her sensible self.

Shaking her head with clicking beads, Nawel gave voice to her scepticism. “She’s still writing all her letters to him in French!” She threw her hands up in the air. “And she knows he can’t read that. Why would she do something like that and be reasonable with something of more consequence?”

Rubbing the bridge of her nose Enora nodded. “We’ll have to talk with her. I don’t really know what has caused her to be this… hostile.”

Nawel only shrugged. She didn’t really know either. Sirius Black seemed decent enough, judging by his letters and the fact that he hadn’t missed even one that he had promised to send.

Before they could go into more detail on what exactly they wanted to tell their mother, or agree on
a strategy, a car stopped next to where they were sitting close to the kerb, honking insistently.

“Looks as if your mother is here, Mesdemoiselles Moreau,” Professor Toudoire said, waving a hand in the direction of the car. “Move now, quick!”

The two of them did as instructed, deftly dodging other pedestrians on their way over to where they could see their mother behind the car’s wheel.

“Maman! You’re here!” Nawel exclaimed, despite all her worries happy to see her mother after so long. She would have loved to give her a crushing hug in greeting but was reduced to quickly opening the door and slipping into the back seat, moving over to the other side to make the way free for her sister, slipping in right behind her. The professor passed them their luggage through the door – shrunken down, of course – before they closed it, and the Professor stepped back, waving.

“Of course I’m here!” Olivienne laughed. “Where else should I be, if not here to spend the holidays with my two precious girls?” She waved to the professor still standing outside, before concentrating on the traffic around them, preparing to slip right back onto the street.

“Tell me how school’s going. There is a lot of time until we’ll reach the address I was sent. And you’ll have to keep me entertained, or I’ll fall asleep. I’m still struggling with jet lag.”

“School is going well! We have almost all our homework finished already,” Nawel started to talk excitedly. Maybe they would get to show their Maman some magic during these holidays. With other adult magicals around, the risk of getting something wrong would finally be low enough that she just couldn’t forbid them to show her any longer.

ooOoo

“Deep breaths, Sirius. You can do this,” Remus murmured into his friend’s ear as they all moved from the garden – where they had once again fought a vicious game of chess to the amusement of Marcus – to the front of the house where a car had just stopped.

Harry was walking next to his godfather and Marcus, the little bundle of energy that he was, was running at full speed to see who had just arrived. “Don’t run onto the street!” Sirius called after the small boy, fingering his wand. Remus also had his wand in hand ready to cast a spell to drag the boy back should it become necessary.

The car was a relatively simple one, painted in the colours of a company renting cars to people, and three women were getting out of it.

Marcus turned tail and ran back to hide behind Harry, peering around his big brother in curiosity. The two girls grinned and exclaimed something in French that had them both giggling afterwards.

The other woman obviously was their mother, for once smiling – something Remus knew hadn’t happened often when she and Sirius had met – as she was watching the young boy run with flying robes.

Remus stopped next to Sirius, who took a deep breath, before taking one step forward. “Olivienne, Nawel, Enora, welcome. I hope you had a good drive here. I’m certain you would want to freshen up, maybe eat and drink something. Come in.” Sirius had a healthy blush on his cheeks, and he trembled slightly. For someone who knew him as well as Remus did it was obvious how nervous
he was.

The teenage witches who just had arrived were nervous as well, their eyes flicking from one person to the next, taking in them and their surroundings. They seemed intelligent and curious, a good combination. Remus had trouble reading the girls’ mother, though.

With a nudge of his elbow, Remus reminded Sirius that introductions were in order.

“Right, where are my manners?” Sirius took the cue. They had arranged a number of signals beforehand making sure that Remus would be able to support his friend in a way that wasn’t too obvious. “Let me introduce my other guests.” First he laid a hand on Remus’ shoulder. “This is my good friend since we went to Hogwarts together, Remus Lupin. He has worked as a Professor for Defence at Hogwarts in the past, and now primarily is working as a history tutor.” Remus gave a slight bow and got curt nods in return. It might have been unusual not to introduce by rank, but Sirius was adamant to go by age.

“Over there is my godson, Harry, who was adopted last summer and now is heir Potter and Slytherin. Currently he’s preparing for his OWLs at Hogwarts.”

Harry rolled his eyes, smiled, and bowed. “You weren’t part of the Beauxbatons delegation during the tournament our last school year? I’m sure I would have remembered either of you if you had been.”

“We were too young,” one of the girls answered, smiling back, obviously not unhappy with Harry’s easygoing attitude.

“The boy hiding behind Harry is his little brother, Marcus. The both of them are here for a little holiday, as their adoptive father has important duties to see to, and I was only too happy to offer them a little vacation away from home. Neither of them has ever been to France before.”

Madame Moreau nodded and took a few steps until she was standing right behind her daughters. “As you may have already guessed, these are my daughters, Enora and Nawel. Both are students at Beauxbâtons, and two of the best students there.” Her accent was quite thick, and she put some emphasis on the name of the school. Remus wasn’t really sure, but he thought there was a hint of a challenge in her voice. Sometimes he really wished the stories about the heightened senses of a werewolf were true. It would come in rather handy from time to time.

“Why don’t I show you all your rooms, so you can store your luggage, before we get some refreshments from the kitchen?” Remus tried to get them all moving after a lengthy moment of them all only standing there, almost frozen to their spots on the lawn.

“Yes!” one of the girls agreed, seemingly happy to get out of the awkward situation, starting to walk in direction of the cottage. “Our professor shrunk our luggage?”

Remus picked up the hint of a question and smiled reassuringly. “I’ll be able to unshrink them once we’re in the room your sister and you will be using. Just follow me.”

Marcus followed Harry like a shadow as they all finally moved into the house and up the stairs to the bedrooms.

The whole process was painfully awkward in a way Remus hoped would quickly vanish. Maybe he should make it possible for Sirius and Olivienne to talk in private in the hope of clearing the air.

“That is a nice room.” Enora said, flopping down on one of the beds, only to sit upright again the moment Marcus jumped to land next to her.
“What ice cream do you like best?” he wanted to know, tilting his head to the side as Remus noticed him doing quite often.

“What Mango. And which is yours?”

“But I haven’t tried them all yet!” Marcus declared and then started to explain his grand plan of eating all possible flavours of ice cream at least once so he could decide which one his true favourite was.

It was a rocky start, but Marcus’ earnest interest to get to eat more ice cream helped to get them move into the kitchen and get a tentative conversation flowing.

Remus was confident that the rest would come with time.

oooOOooo

Bill had gathered a few general emergency materials from various corners of his flat, trying not to think too much about the mix of excitement, anxiety, and curiosity coursing through him.

When he had everything he thought he might need — but fervently hoped to have brought in vain in the end — Bill grabbed his favourite work robes and then walked over into his tiny kitchen. Slipping his right arm into the sleeve, Bill eyed the small bronze disk of a portkey he had put on his small kitchen table late yesterday evening after an inconspicuous owl had brought it. Without a note or any other information. He had felt as if he were in some ridiculous children’s book about a spy. A portkey without instructions.

In fact he knew exactly how to activate the portkey, and where it would take him, as he and Marvolo had talked about it after Bill had agreed to help with the ritual. But, understandably, Marvolo didn’t want to risk anyone learning about what he was doing.

For a moment Bill just stood there in his tiny kitchen — dirty dishes from the day before stacked next to the sink, a few old and wrinkly apples almost falling from the edge of the small cooling cabinet, window in dire need of being washed — and contemplated what he was about to do. The kind of ritual going to take place today was highly experimental, and because it was linked to such dark magic — even though it was created to undo what had been done — it was doubly likely to land on the list of forbidden magics should the Ministry ever learn of it.

But his father’s words that it was always good to help those who asked for help, and his own conviction that it was a good thing that Marvolo Slytherin was working towards, undoing the damage he had done to himself by creating so many horcruxes, still was at the forefront of his mind. That the plan was to create a ritual safe for Harry so that they would be able to remove that errant piece of soul from him without causing him harm, only added to the feeling that this was the right decision.

With a sigh and a decisive nod, Bill picked up the portkey and spoke the activation phrase. “Malfoy Manor.”

ooOoo
For a moment Malcolm Greengrass stood there eyeing the red-headed wizard who had landed right next to him in a lush and luxurious receiving room, before he decided to attempt some polite interaction. After all, they were here for a common goal. “Mr. Weasley.” He gave a polite nod and felt like kicking himself. Way to go to be polite.

The other wizard chuckled, shaking his head a little. “The situation is a little bit surreal, isn’t it? Hello, Healer Greengrass.” The curse-breaker – whom Malcolm knew would be there as his Lord had informed him – eyed the healer’s bag Malcolm had brought and then met the healer’s eyes. “I see you came well prepared as well?” As if to explain this question Weasley held up a satchel presumably filled with whatever he had thought to bring.

It wasn’t Malcolm’s place to question his Lord’s decisions, but today he felt different. He knew what his Lord was going to do, had taken a vow to keep what happened in the past to make this ritual necessary a secret, was trained to react to problems that might arise, and even though he wasn’t as accomplished as his Lord in the art of rituals, he had gone out of Britain for his healer training for the sole purpose of learning about the older ritualistic healing methods.

How was it that a Weasley could be here?

The wizard turned on his heel slowly, taking in the room, seeming totally unconcerned. When he spoke up, Malcolm felt himself tense. “Please try to keep your death glares down. Marvolo might get distracted. And even if you have trouble believing me, I’m here to help. In the end, this is a test run to check if the ritual created will work on Harry without harming him. If you can’t believe in me helping for any other reason, please believe that I wouldn’t want him to be harmed.”

Malcolm huffed, not answering that… plea, but remembering his Lord’s instructions. He was to work together with William Weasley, or else.

Before the uncomfortable situation between them could get any worse – Malcolm felt that the tension should be able to block a stunner – an elf made an appearance. “Please follow, wizardsies. Master Lord want you to come to ritual room.”

Picking up their supplies, the two wizards followed the elf out of the room and down a hall filled with different paintings. Malcolm had been here before, but it was obvious that Weasley had not. He was looking around like a small child in a toy store. Or a wizard just turned eleven in Ollivanders shop getting his first wand. Malcolm felt like rolling his eyes, but restrained himself. It would have been as uncouth as the other’s behaviour to do so. But it was tempting.

They walked through a music room, and soon reached a plain wooden door with a glass doorknob. The elf didn’t turn the handle to open the door – it was too short to reach it anyway – but waved a spindly hand, which caused the door to open by magic. Weasley left Malcolm to walk through first, and he gladly accepted, stepping through the doorway.

It was a spacious ritual room, made entirely with slate grey stone, no windows or seams disturbing the smooth surface.

He couldn’t walk in far, as there already was a complicated circle drawn on the floor, and the Dark Lord was still working on it, so he took a few steps to the side, careful not to disturb anything.

Weasley was just as careful as he stepped in, making Malcolm rethink his assessment as the redhead started to analyse the circle laid down with eager eyes.

The Dark Lord sat back, hair falling in loose waves around his face, piece of chalk soaked in something in hand, and looked up to where they were standing. “Malcolm, Bill, you’re in time.”
Malcolm still felt strange seeing his Lord in so little clothing. Even though he was the man’s healer, normally he didn’t get to see him in anything but robes. The Dark Lord simply didn’t get ill. “Malcolm, you can set up over there.” A hand was waved to one corner of the room, where a simple stool was set up. With a small bow – he would not kneel in front of a Weasley – Malcolm walked over and set his bag down to place potions into an order he was accustomed to in emergency situations.

While he was working on that, he did watch and listen to what Weasley and the Dark Lord were doing. “Shall I start checking everything?” the curse-breaker asked, as if he had any right to question the Dark Lord’s competence with runes.

“Yes, please. I just have to finish this part, before I’ll start checking it again,” was the Dark Lord’s answer, and Malcolm almost let go of one of the blood-replenishing potions in shock.

Setting down the last phial of a strong pain relief potion – he was pretty convinced that he would need those – Malcolm finally sat down, leaning back against the wall, and watched his Lord and the eldest Weasley son work on the circle in a way that was eerie.

It looked like they had worked together often. But how could that be?

“Can I have one piece of that chalk?” Weasley asked at one point without looking up or adding any address of respect. When the Dark Lord simply picked one up, calling out “Catch!” and threw it across the room, Malcolm felt his jaw drop. Those two must have worked together for quite a while to get to this level of… camaraderie. There was no other way to name this ease of interaction.

“Isn’t really a gap in the lines, but the floor is a little rough here, so better safe than sorry,” Weasley said, setting the chalk down on the floor to re-draw a set of runes with a careful touch.

Malcolm knew he hadn’t all the information he would need to understand the Dark Lord’s reasons to have a Weasley here, of all people, but watching the two of them work convinced the healer that it probably had been a good choice on his Lord’s part to include the other wizard.

ooOoo

Thankfully the room was heated to a degree that he didn’t feel cold when he started out, and the effort of crawling around on the floor, drawing intricate patterns, interlocking circles, and elaborate rune arrays without smudging them, helped create the warmth that he needed not to feel exposed only wearing a thin, undyed linen shirt just long enough to fall to below his knees.

At first he had tried drawing with a robe over the shirt, but it had managed to smudge the first few lines, so Marvolo had removed them and started fresh without the additional cover of a robe. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn’t. No use in trying to make it work when it wasn’t going to.

All in all, the preparations he had made for this ritual had been more involved than those for the last attempt. It had been a suggestion from Bill – who currently was on the other side of the circle, checking the part where the cup was going to sit – who had reasoned that Marvolo should involve his own state of mind in the ritual that had added so much to the preparations. The remorseless murder of an innocent was a big part in the creation of a horcrux. The true remorse felt for that act...
was the only known and documented way of returning a soul piece to its original body. Why should they assume the state of mind of the caster of the ritual they had been working on would be of no consequence?

So Marvolo had tried to get into a frame of mind somewhat resembling remorse. He had to admit he hadn’t been all that successful.

He wasn’t sorry to have killed that old witch hoarding money and objects, keeping them away from her own family, boosting her self-image by basking in their reflected glory. The fact that she had shamelessly flirted with a much younger man really wouldn’t have counted against her that much, if not for the fact she had had a tendency to touch without asking. Marvolo remembered putting up with it, even flirting with her on Burke’s orders – and his own insight into human nature – to get her to pay more, or even part with one of her treasures. But it did nothing to make her death a loss in his eyes.

But he felt sorry that he had used her elf – he didn’t even remember the poor thing’s name – to stage an accident to explain Mrs. Smith’s death. That had been unnecessary. He was easily intelligent enough to find a way to accomplish a cover without involving others as he had done then.

Did he think it would help that he felt kind of bad about taking the easy way out with covering up his crime? Probably not, but that had been the best he had been able to manage since Bill had brought up that idea.

It probably would be easier to bring himself to feel somewhat remorseful when preparing to remove the horcrux from Harry. It would have been easy to stun Lily Potter instead of killing her. That probably would have changed everything in ways he could not fathom, but it would have been easier in that moment.

Not willing to linger too long on the fact that his irritation had spelled his own downfall that night, Marvolo carefully stood to get a better view of the whole ritual circle.

He slowly turned a full circle, barely moving his bare feet, and took in his work. The raw clay bowls with various herbs placed at the convection points around the circle, the lines connecting everything, small patches of salt lines, only the cup and himself still missing from the picture.

“What do you think, Bill?” Marvolo asked, ignoring the pale and startled looking healer in his corner. He shouldn’t let himself be distracted by the man’s inability to comprehend changes as simple as getting to know a wizard and accepting the expert knowledge gained through hard work.

“I think this looks good. Not a line or grain out of place. I see no reason to delay any longer,” Bill said, gathering the few pieces of chalk in his easy reach and carefully standing up and stepping back.

Marvolo nodded, and carefully stepped out of the design drawn on the floor, walking over to the place next to the niche where he had placed the cup hidden under his robe next to his folded clothes already stored on the shelf to be out of the way once he was ready to begin.

While he picked up one of his three remaining horcruxes – counting Harry – Bill collected the last pieces of random chalk around the circle before retreating to another stool placed in a corner of the room. Out of the way, just like Malcolm.

Setting down the cup precisely in the middle of the circle drawn for the soul container, Marvolo started to breathe in the even pattern he was so used to by now. Time to put aside everything
unrelated – the incredulous disbelief Malcolm displayed, Bill’s obvious amusement with the situation, his own worry over Harry and Marcus in the care of Black – and concentrate on the ritual, and why it had been a bad idea to murder that old creepy witch.

A few careful steps brought Marvolo into the circle drawn for him to sit in, where he carefully sat down – making sure not to flash his two onlookers – and settled into the best position to sit in for a prolonged time on the hard floor.

Then he started the chant to extract the soul piece from the cup, the container he had stored the broken piece in quite some time ago. This part hadn’t been adapted to the changes made to the ritual. Those had been made mostly to the process after the soul shard was free of the horcrux container.

Slowly everything that had been on his mind vanished, his gaze concentrated on the golden cup with the badger and those two handles while Marvolo slowly noticed a red glow around the cup.

In the next minutes – or however long it actually did take – the glow grew, if not by much. Then it floated upwards, just as if it was steam rising from a cauldron. The moment the floating cloud of red-glowing soul shard detached from the cup, Marvolo changed his chant, trying very hard not to think about the pain he was expecting.

That could seriously mess up his concentration if he allowed it to happen.

This was the new part of the ritual. Instead of trying to move the shard into a different object, the lines on the ground and the burning herbs as well as the words he were speaking urged the glowing shard to move directly to his own body.

And move it did.

Quickly.

Much quicker than the last time he had tried something similar. Probably because there were no competing forces at work this very moment.

The moment the glowing cloud made contact with Marvolo’s chest, right over his heart, a wave of pain shot through him and as much as he tried, he didn’t really manage to say the words for the chant to help reconnect the severed piece of his soul.

Then the pain ebbed a little, a voice picking up the chant that wasn’t his own.

The world turned black, and Marvolo felt his body tilting sideways, but he also heard the chant coming to an end.

Just before he lost consciousness Marvolo came to the conclusion that this still needed some work.

ooOoo

Lucius was standing next to the door to the ritual room barely refraining from pacing. He knew that barging in, interrupting the ritual his Lord was conducting in there would be a tremendously stupid idea, but he felt tempted to go in anyway.

He had been playing a game of chess with Draco in the family parlour when he had felt the first
howler being destroyed by the wards. And after that there had been a lot more than one. Lucius knew that there should be no way that those howlers could have an impact on the happenings in the ritual room, as that room was warded specifically to keep out outside interference. But the sheer number of howlers that had collided with the wards around Malfoy Manor had him worrying anyway.

After quickly checking in with Narcissa and their lovely newborn daughter Cassiopeia – named after one of the many Blacks Narcissa was related to – Lucius had come down to the ritual room, seeing the door still closed and the ritual under way seemingly undisturbed.

He was just about to give in to his urge to pace when the door to the ritual room opened. The greeting he was about to utter died in Lucius’ throat as he spotted the form of his Lord being carried by the curse-breaker he had only admitted into his house under his Lord’s orders.

“He’s fine,” the wizard suddenly said in a reassuring tone Lucius felt resentful against almost immediately. “Just passed out, Healer Greengrass said.” Lucius stepped aside unconsciously the moment Weasley moved forward away from the door, making room for Malcolm Greengrass.

“He’s right,” the Healer said, his wand in hand and a bag slung over his shoulder, potion phials clinking against each other as he moved. “Our Lord will need to rest, but other than exhaustion after the ritual, he is fine.”

“I’ll show you to one of the guest rooms.” Lucius said, his mind racing with possibilities, just like the last time his Lord had borrowed the ritual room he didn’t really know what the ritual had been. Should he inform the healer about the howlers? It probably was a factor the healer needed to know about.

The three of them hurried along the halls of Malfoy Manor and Lucius tried to concentrate on the important next steps. But it wasn’t all that easy to banish the question of why Weasley was carrying his Lord from his mind. Luckily he was in front, leading the group to the room always ready for their Lord since his return, so that there was no way for him to see Weasley carrying their Lord bridal style, or for him to be caught throwing glances at the odd sight.

Then they reached the suite of rooms, and Lucius opened the door. Once inside he stepped to the side, out of the way, and watched the other two act.

Weasley quickly walked over to the bed, where Malcolm Greengrass already had turned down the blanket, poised to cast diagnostics the moment their Lord was placed down.

Lucius felt his eyebrow wing up, watching how Weasley carefully tucked the Dark Lord in under the blankets before standing back, turning and walking over to where Lucius was waiting.

“Why were you waiting at the door, Lord Malfoy?” The red-headed wizard asked, his attention focused on the Healer assessing the health of the unconscious Dark Lord.

“The outer wards had been disturbed by an undetermined number of howlers. I wanted to make sure they didn’t influence the ritual in a negative way.” At the last moment Lucius caught himself calling the Dark Lord his Lord, only to realise that both he and Greengrass had done so more than once already with the Weasley clearly within earshot.

But Weasley didn’t seem to notice as he furrowed his brow in thought. “I don’t think it did impact the ritual. How many are we talking here? As many as trashed the mail room at the Prophet?”

Lucius nodded, watching Greengrass flutter around their Lord. “The impacts were so close to each
other than I can’t even tell you how many there were. But I guess, considering the ritual, I can hardly call the Aurors in, can I?” He had heard from within the Ministry that Narcissa’s niece had been assigned to that investigation, and probably would be the one sent if he got word to the Auror Department about the attack of today.

“And even after I’m done with clean up they would ask why he’s here, knocked out in one of the guest rooms. But not reporting it might seem suspicious once they find the one responsible...” Weasley mused before standing up straight. “I’ll go down, clean up, and see if there’s anything of note Marvolo might want to analyse later. Once I’m done I’ll let you know?”

“I will send an elf to lead the way. You can send it back to inform me when you’re done, Mr. Weasley,” Lucius decided, working hard to make sure his surprise over Weasley calling the Dark Lord by his chosen name didn’t show.

“Sounds good to me,” Weasley agreed and quickly followed the elf Lucius did call out of the room and back down to the ritual room.

Once Greengrass declared that there wasn’t really much that Lucius could do, the blond went back to his wife, son, and daughter to explain the situation and to puzzle over the odd familiarity Weasley had shown to the Dark Lord.

oooOOooo

As always, the amount of paperwork that needed to be filled in, the number of letters to be read, and the crowd of visitors waiting to be let in had been staggering. But now with all of that finally done and finished, Cornelius had earned a nice evening at home with his wife. Maybe the two of them could enjoy a good glass of wine and some nice music on the wireless. Wasn’t there a broadcast of Celestina Warbeck planned?

Cornelius stood from behind his desk and stretched until his back popped, and he felt some of the tension from sitting too long leave his body. That last bit of work had taken longer than he had planned for.

Just as he was picking up his cloak from the stand in the corner, there was a commotion outside of his office. What were his secretary and assistant getting up to now?

With no little bit of frustration – this certainly would take quite some time over nothing – Cornelius walked over, opened the door and found himself buried under the body of one of his Auror guards, a shield flaring to life around them.

There were explosions, the smell of burned parchment and paper, yells, and the sound of something heavy being thrown onto the floor.

Then suddenly silence. Or nearly. Only the sounds of burning paper, an almost whispery, crackly noise, and breathing were to be heard for a few moments.

“Are you unharmed, Minister?” the auror who had shielded him suddenly asked, having stood from his position on top of Cornelius, holding out a hand to help him up.

“I think I am,” Cornelius answered, still in a daze, looking around what once had been the anteroom to his office.
The heavy desk had been thrown on its side, used as a shield most likely, and was badly scorched, as was the rest of the furniture, the carpet, the walls, the ceiling, all portraits... basically, everything looked as if there had been a fire burning in here.

“What happened here?” Cornelius heard himself ask, noting almost unconsciously that there were no bodies on the floor.

“Red flying memos came in, like a murder of crows, exploding and screaming, diving for the door to your office, Minister. As if someone managed to create… flying memo... howlers…” The Auror spoke slower and slower towards the end, his eyes widening in realisation, before falling silent, raising his wand into a ready position.

“Exactly like that,” a frazzled voice said from behind the second desk. Everyone turned to look at the speaker and saw a lanky red-headed wizard crawl out from under the desk, soot marring his face a little, a frozen paper plane in a dangerous red clutched in one hand.

“How did you manage that, Weasley?” the second Auror guard asked – Dawlish was the senior Auror on protection detail today – helping the secretary to her feet.

“Mom is rather fond of sending howlers. Not that I got many, but I don’t like them screaming near me either. So I decided to learn a spell that's capable of freezing them. Wasn’t sure it would work. Glad it did.”

The reinforcements automatically alerted when there was danger detected near the Minister’s office, made an appearance in that moment, bringing the healer on staff with them, who got to work immediately.

Cornelius endured the diagnostic spells while thinking to himself that he had been right where Arthur’s middle son was concerned. The lad could become great, with the right support. He was methodical and discreet, and could keep his head under pressure, a valuable combination.

That he had managed to prevent one of those flying memos from being destroyed might give the Aurors the clue they needed to get to the bottom of these dangerous attacks via mail.

Cornelius came home later than he had planned, but he got the glass of wine he wanted to have and a nice back rub from his wife.

The next day hopefully would bring forth serious advances in the Auror investigation.

Chapter End Notes

I have to say that I just love the English group terms for several different animals and couldn’t resist incorporating one there at the end.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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The moment he woke he knew he wasn’t in his bed at home. For one, Nagini wasn’t there, and the smell was somehow different. The sheets were silk. Not really bad, but he usually preferred cotton to silk, as it wasn’t as slippery. After his senses had told him that he wasn’t under any threat to his safety, Marvolo tried to sit up, but flopped back down almost instantly.

That had hurt!

He didn’t manage to contain a painful hiss, which drew attention to the fact that he was awake.

“My Lord!” steps hurried over the floor – some polished wood with a few carpets by the sound of it – and stopped right next to the bed. “How are you feeling, my Lord? My spells indicate that you’re mostly fine, but I would like to get a first-hand account from you.”

Inwardly he rolled his eyes, as he really wanted to groan in pain and frustration, but couldn’t risk losing face like that.

Without opening his eyes or sitting up again, Marvolo gave his answer, sounding decidedly short-tempered. “I’m well enough. A little sore, but nothing a pain-relief potion won’t cure.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Malcolm answered, and Marvolo heard glass clinking together.

A hand and arm were inserted behind Marvolo’s shoulders, helping him to sit up so he could drink the potion in the phial pressed against his lips a few seconds later. The relief of pain started almost the moment the potion reached Marvolo’s stomach. One of Severus’ creations, Marvolo was sure. The man had managed to improve on quite a few of the standard recipe. His potions kept longer and worked faster.

Once the pain was all but gone, Marvolo carefully opened his eyes and sat up, the covers falling down from his chest to pool in his lap. He was in one of the guest bedrooms – or rather, suits – at Malfoy Manor, which he had expected. Where else should he be after he had conducted that ritual the day… had it been yesterday? “How long have I been asleep?”

“Several hours, my Lord. It is the day after the ritual. Morning, to be precise,” Malcolm informed Marvolo, giving him a bow now that he no longer was lying flat on his back.

“Thank you for your care, Malcolm. I think I’m well enough to get up, take a shower, and dress. Or do you disagree?” He really wanted to take a long and hot shower, and now that the pain was
gone he felt keenly that he had missed more than one meal. Breakfast would be quite nice, as well.

“I have no objections, my Lord,” Malcolm agreed with another bow. “William Weasley placed something for you on the desk by the window over there, my Lord. I’ll go inform Lord Malfoy of your good health.”

Waving him off, Marvolo carefully worked his way over to the edge of the much-too-big bed. “Go do that.”

After Malcolm was gone Marvolo didn’t keep the winces from his face any longer. Even with the pain dulled, he was pretty stiff and clumsy in his movements. A hot shower would take care of that.

Almost an hour later, Marvolo stepped out of the en-suite bathroom closing the last button on his shirt, hair still slightly damp, but most of the tension gone. Before he would go down to speak with Lucius – his wife probably was still resting – he still had a report to read. He sauntered over to the desk where Malcolm had indicated that Bill had left something for Marvolo. And there was indeed a neatly rolled and sealed scroll resting right next to a pouch made from dark green velvet on that desk.

Pretty sure that he knew what was contained in the pouch, Marvolo picked up the scroll first and broke the seal. Bill’s description of the ritual from his perspective matched well with what Marvolo remembered. The curse-breaker also had included the suggestion to change the ritual another time to include a second participant to speak the chants so that the whole process would hopefully run smoother. He couldn’t quite disagree that it probably would become necessary to create a stable process.

He sighed, and let the scroll roll back on itself before picking up the pouch which held – as Bill had written – the cup as shiny and pristine as the day he had liberated it from the showcase in Hepzibah Smith’s living room.

The ritual had worked.

With a light cold shiver running down his back, Marvolo briefly thought what changes he was going to go through because another part of his mangled soul had returned home.

It only had been a rather small part, the cup being one of the later horcruxes, so hopefully the changes wouldn’t end up being all that drastic.

Parchment and pouch vanished inside a pocket of the robes Marvolo put on, and he walked out of the room and into the hall. Now the only thing left to do here was to deliver his best wishes to Lucius. It was a bit archaic that only the father was offered congratulations, but he guessed that a woman who just had given birth would be happy to skip social niceties in favour of rest.

As usual the halls of Malfoy Manor were spotlessly clean, and before he had even passed two doors, an elf popped into the hall right next to him, bowing deep. “Where is Lord’s Master going, Master?”

Sometimes their grammar was almost painful. But he had to remember they were powerful in their own right and a force to reckon with if loyal to their family or an individual. “I’m in search of Lucius and Healer Greengrass. Where might I find them?”

“Theys are in the main parlour, Lord’s Master,” the elf answered, bobbing its head, obviously happy to be of help.
“Thanks,” Marvolo said with a nod, already adjusting his planned path to take one of the less opulent staircases, so that he would reach the main parlour more quickly than by taking the big staircase that had been built to impress. Behind him a rather loud popping sound told him about the elf’s departure. But he didn’t really pay it much mind.

The walk to the main parlour was a short one, and he could hear voices before he had reached the door.

“You shouldn’t give up hope so fast. There is a witch out there for you.” Lucius was speaking in a consoling tone which probably was intended to be helpful.

“It’s not that easy, truly it is not. I’ve been searching ever since our Lord gave out his order, but there aren’t many unmarried witches near my age around.” Malcolm sounded unhappy, as if he was about to give up. Marvolo wondered if his healer was narrowing his options too much.

He took the last few steps to the door, and moved into the room, instantly gaining the attention of his two followers. They both stood from where they had been sitting, giving him bows from the waist, before standing straight again.

“Where have you searched so far, Malcolm?” If Bill had been here, Marvolo would have been tempted to bet on his guess that the younger Greengrass brother only had tried to find a witch from an old family. One of the respectible families.

The young healer looked a little sheepish and blushed, but conditioning was enough to make him answer anyway. “All over Europe, my Lord. But most witches my age are already married, engaged, or betrothed. I’m trying to follow your order, my Lord.”

With a sigh – he would have won that bet – Marvolo walked over to the best of the armchairs and sat down, waving at the loveseat on the other side of the low table for the others to sit down as well.

They hurried to comply with his order, and for the moment, ignoring his original plan to just speak with Lucius and go home, Marvolo fixed his gaze on Malcolm. “And why limit yourself so? Severus has found a lovely wife, even if a Squib might not be a good fit to ensure that your children have strong magic. But look at my son Henry. His mother was a descendant of the Slytherin family, married to a member of the Potter family. Or the daughter of Andromeda Black, now Tonks. She’s a metamorphmagus. Don’t you think it could be a good idea to no longer limit yourself in such a way?”

Malcolm didn’t answer, but Marvolo was pretty sure he had given the other some food for thought. And with any luck, this advice would make its rounds to all the others facing the same problem from narrow mindedness as Malcolm had. It was a little disappointing that he needed to spell it out this clearly. All the hints were there for all to see. Why they all decided not to see them, to ignore them, was a conundrum he wasn’t sure he could solve.

So Marvolo turned to look at Lucius. “I want to congratulate you and your wife on your new daughter. May she find only happiness in her life.”

“Thank you, my Lord.” Lucius replied, and for a moment Marvolo could see true happiness in the grey eyes before the polite mask of a politician covered that emotion once again. “I’ll make sure to let Narcissa know of your well wishes.”

Aware that he had promised his sons – and especially Marcus – to call on the mirror this morning, Marvolo pushed himself to his feet. “Thank you for your hospitality, Lucius. I have to leave now.
Have a good day, you two.” He left the parlour and walked out onto the lawn, apparating from there directly to his own home. It was a nice spring day, and he really was curious as to what Marcus and Harry had gotten up to in the meantime.

Maybe Black would beg for him to come pick the boys up.

Only one way to find out.

oooOOooo

With a small sigh Harry let himself fall into one of the wicker chairs standing out on the patio with a good look over the garden. As he had predicted the first evening here at the cottage, Marcus hadn’t let him sleep in even one morning.

And today had been no different. After Marcus had managed to wake the whole house, they had had an early breakfast, and now they were all out in the garden enjoying a sunny if slightly chill morning.

Sirius, Remus, and Enora, as well as a reluctant Miss Moreau were entertaining Marcus with another game of chess – Marcus really liked watching the big pieces battle against each other – and Nawel was sitting in one of the other chairs out on the deck, writing in some kind of small notebook. Harry guessed it probably was a diary of some sort.

He had brought some revision cards as a voice in his mind – sounding suspiciously like Hermione – kept nagging at him to do at least a little bit of revising during the holidays.

Once he had cycled completely through the stack of cards of the plants and potion ingredients he had the most trouble with, Harry looked over to where the girl, who possibly was Sirius’ daughter, was still scribbling almost furiously in her book. He noticed with a little surprise that she was using something like a biro. He was so used to seeing people using quills by now that it really took him a moment to realise what it was.

“You’re not writing like... a really long diary entry, are you?” Harry asked and promptly blushed when he realised that that might have been an insensitive thing to ask.

“No, I’m not,” she answered, not even looking up from her work, sounding distracted.

Considering the possibility that she was doing homework for school just as he had done only a moment ago, Harry stayed silent and shuffled his cards into a new, random order.

“What are you doing?”

Harry turned to look at Nawel sitting there with her book closed in her lap. He smiled and neatened the pile of cards. “Repeating and revising for my OWL exams later on in the year. Mostly different plants, Herbology- and Potions-related information, and other potion ingredients, such as insects, stones, and the like. Mostly stuff you need to simply learn by heart.” He held the cards up, one side annotated with the Image of the plant or ingredient in question, the other filled with all the information and sometimes more sketches.

“Where did you get the cards?” she asked, holding out her hand with the silent question if she might have a look.
Harry handed the cards over. “I made them myself. And I like to think the act of making them helped me to learn at least parts of it. Gathering all the information and deciding what’s important enough to include. Well, the drawing part was fun.” That the rest had been tedious because his notes from years past had been in terrible condition better went unsaid.

“Neat,” was the comment Nawel gave when she handed the cards back, after checking a few of them out. Then she continued to talk, answering Harry’s question from the start. “I’m writing a story based on one of the books I like. Back at school such stories are passed around in the dorms. There simply are not enough fiction books available. And those that are have been read so often. What books do you like, Harry?”

She was writing her own story?

“No? I don’t really read much besides school books. Don’t really have the time. And I’m not even sure if the library has books that would count as fiction. I have borrowed a few books from friends. Not sure if I like any of those better than others.” Harry shrugged, he really didn’t have much fun reading. “A friend of mine, Hermione, would probably know if there are fiction books in the Hogwarts library. But she always seems to be having fun reading our school books, and others that are definitely not fiction.”

They both looked up when Marcus let out an unusually high-pitched squeal, clapping his hands as one pawn was smashed to rubble by a tower in the middle of the board. As far as Harry had noticed, Marcus was happy whenever a piece was destroyed, unrelated to what colour it was.

“When we learned that we had magic, Maman made sure to get us some children’s books. There was one that is pretty popular. It is about a girl learning she is a witch and how that changes all her plans. You see, she wants to be a detective once she is an adult. There always is a mystery for her to solve. I liked it. But there is no story about twins. Yet.” She fell silent, watching her sister direct one of the black pieces to catch a white pawn.

“So you changed the story to have twins instead?” Harry asked, thinking it an obvious change to make. He vaguely remembered dreaming himself away into stories the teachers had told them back when Dudley and he had started school. Did others do the same?

“Yes. And I like inventing stories. It is something we both have done all the time when we were small. Writing is fun!” At the end she had a big grin on her face.

Without any more word exchanged, the two of them returned to their work, pages turning and cards being shuffled around the only sounds from their spot on the patio, drowned out by loud cheering and laughing from the chess-playing group.

ooOoo

The moment Marvolo arrived at home, he placed the cup in a cupboard behind a closed door, uncertain what he wanted to do with it now that it no longer held a part of his soul. But at the moment, he had a call to make. The notes from Bill went into a warded drawer of his desk, later to be moved over to Headquarters, where all his notes were being kept. Then Marvolo picked up the mirror from the corner of his desk, where he had left it the previous day, and sat down in his chair, resting back comfortably for a call he expected to last quite some time.
“Harry.” Marvolo spoke to his mirror, hoping that Marcus wasn’t harassing people because he was impatient.

It didn’t take long before the reflective surface changed and Harry looked out of the mirror sporting a big grin. “Father! How are you?” Harry flinched and Marvolo could hear the sound of rubble falling in the background.

“I’m fine, Harry. Are you demolishing that cottage? I did work on making it habitable, you know, so please don’t tear it down.” There were shouts somewhere in the distance too, and something reminding him of a laugh somewhere nearer.

Harry’s grin only got wider. “Don’t worry. Marcus and most of the others are simply playing a game of chess.”

One of Marvolo’s brows winged up. A game of chess? With that much noise, the blasted enormous chess game Minerva McGonagall had contributed to Dumbledore’s gauntlet of protections came to mind. Hopefully even Black wouldn’t be that idiotic to let a child play such a set? “How big is it?”

There was no harm in asking his son.

“Relatively big. The pawns are shorter than Marcus, but the king and queen are bigger. He mostly stands by the side of the board, shouting directions.” the glint in Harry’s eyes made Marvolo think that his son might be thinking of the same set.

“Well,” Marvolo conceded, “that sounds reasonable enough.”

“I’ll go get him,” Harry said, seemingly standing if the hanging plants – something with a lot of green leaves – coming into view were any indication. “He was nagging all through breakfast that we call you.”

It was good to know that Marcus had wanted to see him, and that Harry and the adults at the cottage had managed to rein him in enough to get Marcus to play chess rather than moping around somewhere.

“Marcus! Dad is on the mirror!” Harry called and Marvolo felt something odd happening with his heart at hearing Marcus’ favourite way to address him come from Harry. It had been a big step when the boy had started calling him father even when the two of them were alone, but this was even… more.

“Come over! You wanted to talk with him!” There was some kind of answer that Marvolo didn’t understand, and then running feet as he had become accustomed to hearing almost every day since Marcus had moved in.

There followed a dizzing display of moving colours and shapes as the mirror was handed from Harry to Marcus, before the smiling face of Marcus came into focus. “Dad! Can we have a big chess set? It’s lot’s of fun! And I got to eat ice cream! And I share a room with Harry. That’s great! Can’t you come stay with us for a while?”

As usual the little boy was full of energy, and Marvolo felt himself agreeing with Nagini’s choice of nicknaming him bubbly hatchling. “I have to work, Marcus. But as Lord Black offered to take you and your brother on this little holiday, I thought it was a good opportunity for you two, even without me. We’ll be back together soon enough.”

Marcus was looking somewhere behind the mirror, obviously distracted by another chess piece being smashed to pieces, as the sound of falling rubble once again was clearly to be heard. “Go
back to your chess pieces, Marcus. I can see that’s what you really want to do. Off with you!”
Marvolo felt himself grin as suddenly blue was all he could see in the mirror and a startled yelp –
sounding like Harry – indicated that Marcus simply had let the mirror go.

“Sorry, Father,” Harry said once the mirror had been turned upright again. “Marcus really likes that
chess set.”

Marvolo laughed. “I understand. Really, it’s nice to see that he's secure enough to have fun in this
manner. How have you been?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Marcus doesn’t let any of us sleep in. I've managed to get some revising in.
Sirius clearly likes having me here. And I’m looking forward to the paternity test that will be done
this afternoon. I hope Sirius will be more at ease once that's cleared up.” Harry looked to someone
or something before switching to Parseltongue. :But please tell me how the ritual went. You
look well enough, so I assume nothing major went wrong. But I would like to hear it from
you:.

Assuming that Harry had switched to a language so few spoke because there was someone in
earshot, Marvolo answered in the same language. :It went better than the last attempt. The
container remained unharmed. Bill made some suggestions on how to further adjust the
process:. Happy to indulge Harry’s interest and curiosity – and always aware how Albus’ tendency
to keep the boy in the dark had made his own job so much easier – Marvolo went deeper into the
proposed changes and when he hoped to do another test.

ooOoo

Not for the first time, Nawel tried to decide how it would have been to live surrounded by
dementors while being innocent of the crimes accused of. Sirius Black, the man she dearly hoped
actually was their father, was playing over at the chess set, her mother only looking on with a
frown. It really was a puzzle why she was so harsh. Hopefully Harry Potter-Slytherin – or was it
Slytherin-Potter? – was right that the test planned for this afternoon would lay all doubts to rest.

He now was speaking in hissing noises with his adoptive father through an enchanted mirror,
making her wonder why he stayed here if he wished for privacy for this conversation. Then her
eyes wandered over to where two wand-waving wizards set the chess board back to rights, a small
boy dancing up and down right next to it. She could understand a sibling’s urge to protect the
younger one. She had felt it often enough when someone had attacked Enora, and had seen it at
school when siblings stood up for each other even when they were squabbling most of the time.

She supposed she could overlook the rudeness of speaking in a different language while sitting at
the same table under these circumstances.

Twirling her biro around her fingers, Nawel looked back down at her story and tried to pay no
mind to the hissing happening only a short distance away. She didn’t want to ponder possible
developments after this afternoon. Harry and Marcus were a good example how gaining a father
later in life could play out. She really hoped Enora and she would be as lucky.

ooOoo
Two potions in similar small cauldrons bubbled over their flames, waiting for the last ingredients to be added. They stood far enough from each other that the twins had had enough space to work, as this was a rather quick brew, as Harry remembered only too well.

Nawel tended to the potion on the left, Enora was brewing on the right. Their mother was watching the whole procedure like a hawk. Or maybe like Hedwig watched Pigwidgeon when forced to stay in the little owl’s presence. Wary of what might happen.

The table was littered with containers of ingredients, two cutting boards, pestle and mortar, a set of scales and weights, peelings, and the two copies of the recipe.

“Come, Harry, get my hair,” Sirius said, sitting down on a simple stool so that Harry would have an easier time plucking two hairs from his godfather’s head.

Harry carefully picked up one hair at a time – he remembered none too fondly how Piers once had gotten a good hold of his hair – intent to cause the least amount of pain he could manage. Harry was pretty sure that the eyes of everyone in the room were on him when he walked over to where Enora and Nawel were waiting by their cauldrons.

He dropped one hair into the dark rolling mass inside the first cauldron and walked over to the other while Enora started stirring in even motions. Once he had dropped the second hair he turned and watched as the dark potion became clear, ready for the hair from the two girls to be added.

Those hairs the girls plucked from their heads themselves, letting them fall into the potions almost at the same time, holding each other’s gaze.

Harry felt as if the tension in the room was high enough to use as a bowstring. He shook his head to get rid of the image of Robin Hood – Marcus was fascinated by that story at the moment – concentrating instead on the colour of the potion in Nawel’s cauldron. The cauldron was bigger than the one he had used last year when he had performed this test for Dean and Sirius, so it was barely visible from where Harry was standing.

Slowly the colour was changing, with each turn of the ladle a little bit more and soon Harry was certain that the colour was a deep red and not the milky white it had turned when Dean had been tested to see if Sirius was his father.

A gust of air left Sirius, who had stood up the moment Harry had moved over to the first cauldron, and he slumped for a moment before breaking out in a grin. “Seems as if Harry didn’t bungle the repair of the family tapestry! Welcome, both of you, to the Black family, Enora, Nawel! Let’s clean up and then go get lunch.”

Harry was happy that the tapestry had been proven true, but he wasn’t as caught up in that revelation as Sirius was. He could still feel the tension in the air, saw the stiffening in Mrs. Moreau’s posture, the looks of mixed feelings on the girls’ faces. Even with the claim validated, there still was something to sort out.

If Harry only knew what the problem was.

Deciding to tip Remus off about what he had seen, Harry walked over to the table, starting to gather the ingredients into the basket they had used to carry them here.
“Let’s go play chess!” Marcus called out, jumped up from his place at the table, raced over to one of the twins, grabbed her by the arm, and started dragging her towards the door to the garden. The little boy had been obsessed with the chess pieces almost as tall as he since he had seen them the first time. And now he insisted they play with them when he didn’t want to fly on a broom together with Harry.

Harry and the other twin – Sirius had to work on his ability to tell them apart – stood from the breakfast table with a little more dignity before following the other two out, waving back at the adults.

The tension still wasn’t gone.

Sirius picked up his cup of coffee and took a sip, only to make a grimace when he noticed that it had gotten cold. He cast a quick warming spell and then emptied the cup quickly.

“Me and Harry against you and your sister!” Marcus gleefully yelled, only to be corrected a moment later by one of the girls: “Harry and I.”

Remus gave Sirius a significant look before he stood, picking up the local newspaper. “If you’ll excuse me, I really want to fill in that crossword puzzle.” And with that, Sirius was alone with Olivienne.

The evening before, everyone had retreated back to their rooms pretty quickly, and Remus had come to talk with Sirius. His friend had a way of seeing a situation from so many perspectives that it made Sirius dizzy just thinking about it. But one thing had become abundantly clear: he needed to talk with the mother of his daughters, find out what made her fear this, and make sure she could lay those fears to rest.

Nothing had ever been easier.

Taking a deep breath, because starting to cackle hysterically wouldn’t help, Sirius sat up straighter.

He would need all his Gryffindor bravery for this.

“I’m not sure what I can do to make you less tense, Olivienne. But know that I wish things had gone differently. I should have drunk less that night. I really wish I could remember, and I don’t even know if that’s the case because of my long Dementor exposure or the amounts of alcohol I consumed at that time. I wish that you could have had the option of including me in our daughters’ lives. I wish I had been involved in their lives.” He took another deep breath and looked at Olivienne, who sat at the other end of the table, a croissant broken in two held in her hands. “I know that I can’t undo what happened. But I would hope to offer both Enora and Nawel all the opportunities they could wish for.”

Had she let him jump through hoops?

Probably. He was almost sure she had.
Was it possible she would demand and keep on demanding more and more?

Not impossible. But also not likely. She was proud to have reached the place she was in now her own.

Did it matter?

No.

As long as he got to be a part of his daughters’ lives, and they could choose on their own whether they wanted to take up the mantle of Lady Black, he would be happy.

“As I said before, there will be no pressure from me. You can ask anybody, I never wanted to be Lord Black. Why would I force my own children to be what I didn’t want to become? But how could I keep that possibility from them?”

Still she was not saying anything, only shredding the poor croissant into smaller and smaller pieces.

“So I want to keep writing letters. Meet during holidays. Teach them what they need to know if one of them wants to take over as Lady one day. I’ll handle the paperwork with the Ministry so they are eligible to inherit. And I’ll set up trust funds as a nest egg for when they have finished school…”

Sirius trailed off. He had expected some dialogue here, maybe even that he wouldn’t get a word in edgewise. Not this silence.

The room stayed silent for a while, only the sound of stone smashing against stone, and happy calls from the four children reaching their ears. But Sirius couldn’t stand silence for long, so he caved pretty soon and asked. “Won’t you say something?”

“I’ll lose them, won’t I?” She sounded broken, so different from what she had shown so far. “Now that they have actual family in that world of magic, I’ll lose them even sooner.”

Sirius blinked, rearranging what he had thought was the problem. Well, he could make sure the girls had all they needed to stay in contact with their mother.

“It’s always possible that children sever the contact with their family.” He should know, as he had done exactly that. “But cost won’t be an issue any longer. International portkeys may be expensive, but they’re easily in the budget I have. The girls can go home to you for all their holidays if you can’t come here.” He shrugged. “If you’ll let me, I’ll be there too, bringing what’s needed so I can teach politics and stuff to them. I could pay for plane tickets so you can come to London.” Maybe he shouldn’t concentrate only on money. “From what I have seen and what the two have written, they love you very much. Having a stronger bond to the magical world won’t change that, Olivienne. I’m sure of that. We can sort this out.”

She nodded slowly. “Maybe you are right.” And started to dunk her croissant shreds into a pot of strawberry jam one after the other, eating them directly from her hand.

Sirius decided then and there not to bring up Remus’ idea to write everything down in a contract just now, or maybe not at all that day. It seemed they all probably needed some more time to adjust to what they all had somehow known now being confirmed without a doubt.

oooOOooo
The waiter brought them their waffles, as well as cups of delicious-smelling tea and coffee. Sonja carefully picked up the small sugar dispenser – one of those you needed to turn on its head to get what amounted to a teaspoon full of sugar – and added four measures of sugar to her cup. She had been craving sweets lately.

Severus had asked for honey for his coffee and had earned a horrified look, but got his honey to stir into his coffee.

Their host for the last few days, Yorik van Leewuen, was sitting on the other side of the square table, grinning from ear to ear. “I have to say that I haven’t had such a good time working on a project for a long time.” He raised his cup of coffee as if he was toasting them. “Thank you both for asking me, of all people, to help with the bigger testing.”

“We have to thank you,” Severus insisted, setting his spoon down with a tinkling sound, before getting out his wand to cast a privacy spell around their table. “Without your expertise in tests on the scale required for our family connection potion, we would have been looking at a much longer time before we had any publishable results.”

“But it takes innovative thinking to even get this far! Ever since the goblins forced that treaty, people actually risking research in this direction are more than rare, Severus. This potion certainly will not replace the one the goblins offer, but one might actually save money if doing this test first proves that there is no close connection.” He turned his plate so that the sea of cherry sauce was closer to his hand, giving them both another blinding smile. “And with the way prices have gone up… Rumour has it that the demand in Britain has sky-rocketed?”

Sonja took a sip from her tea to hide her smile at that blatant attempt at fishing for information. Even the first-year Slytherins were more subtle than that.

Severus swallowed his bite of waffle and smiled his little secretive smile. “I assume you have heard of Lord Slytherin returning to society?” Severus asked, and Sonja quickly looked down to her own plate at that gigantic understatement. It sounded so harmless in comparison what really had happened. But Yorik smiled and nodded, so Severus continued with his explanation. “He discovered that a student of Hogwarts is a descendant of the Slytherin family through his mother, who was considered a muggle-born witch. Understandably that caused some curiosity among the witches and wizards in our community.”

“Really? A muggle-born witch? Are you sure? There have been other cases of so-called muggle-born children who really were the result of affairs with a wizard.” The willowy, balding wizard had a secretive air about him as if he was sharing a big scandal with them.

“I’m sure, as I knew her in school and she looked too much like both her non-magical parents to be anything other than their daughter.” Sonja heard the well hidden hurt in her husband’s voice and let one of her hands slide under the table to rest on his knee. On some days the loss of his one-time best friend hurt more than on others.

“That would be an incredible discovery. Do you know of other such cases?” There was a light shining in his eyes that Sonja couldn’t quite identify.

“I know of two more, but as you said, the demand increased significantly, and the wealthy families have an easier time affording the increased fees.” Severus gave a shrug and another smile, diverting the conversation back to their Family Connection Potion and the timetable for the planned test series.
They would return to Scotland the day after tomorrow. Sonja had enjoyed almost every minute of this trip, but she also looked forward to sleeping in her own bed once again.

With a bracing breath, Dora walked up the way from the gates to the imposing building among high hedges – just now starting to sprout small blossoms – going through the questions she was going to ask. The paper-plane howler Percy had managed to freeze had proven that someone from inside the Ministry had created that explosive missile, feeding them in at one of the bigger offices in the administrative departments. The makeup of the thing also had confirmed that the howler hadn’t been bought anywhere, but had been home-crafted in its entirety. That did explain why Dora hadn’t found any hints by checking in with the usual suppliers. The report the Unspeakables had done spoke about impurities diverging from the usual recipe used for howlers, indicating that these had been crafted by someone other than the known suppliers. Maybe that could be a new trail to follow.

But now she was here to inquire after the Howler attack with howlers that had taken place the day before yesterday at Malfoy Manor.

Taking one last breath, straightening her posture and her auror robes, Tonks reminded herself that she was here with the Ministry’s authority backing her, and that she had been assigned to this case because she was capable.

The door opened and an elf stood there looking up to Dora, the toga made from a tea-towel blindingly white. “Miss Auror. What shall Mipsy tell Master why Miss Auror is here?”

“I’m here in an official capacity to investigate the incident with a number of Howlers this past Tuesday,” Dora answered, trying to infuse her voice with a tone of authority. It was still disconcerting when an elf opened the door.

“Come in, Miss Auror,” the elf said in its high-pitched slightly squeaky voice, and Dora did as she as told, coming to stand in a much-too-grand entry hall. What was it with those pretentious buildings? What other value did those materials and vast spaces have, other than bragging and intimidating visitors?

Well, she could at least attest that the intimidating part was working. Which made her feel slightly angry, not a good state to be in when one was working.

The marble floors had another effect. She heard steps – hurried steps – come closer before she could see the person walking towards her.

“Auror Tonks.” She was greeted by the head of the House coming down one hallway, his casual robes billowing around him. “Thank you for coming.”

Dora was surprised at being thanked for coming. She knew all too well that usually Lucius Malfoy faced Auror visits with only barely hidden contempt. Maybe the difference was that this time he had requested someone to come over and had not been checked based on Death Eater allegations, or suspicions over illegal dark artefacts.

“It’s our job to investigate incidents just like the one you reported, Lord Malfoy.” And didn’t calling him that leave a bad taste in her mouth, “Congratulations on your new daughter.”
He accepted her words with a smile, which probably was actually genuine. “I thank you for allowing an additional day of rest for my wife.”

Dora gave another nod back to that. It was custom not to disturb a home with a newborn in it with politics or business in the first few days. Her superiors never would have let her come here before the time was up. “There wasn’t anything to be lost by waiting a little bit longer.” And there sure hadn’t been a chance to get more information from coming earlier. But Dora knew if she wanted to make it into a leadership position, she would have to get over her aversion to handling politicians like Malfoy. Politics was very much a part of any leading position in the Ministry.

“Please follow me to the parlour, Auror Tonks, I’ll be answering your questions there.” Malfoy made a sweeping motion with one arm, indicating the way to the parlour, falling into step with her once she had taken a few steps.

They were silent on their way, Dora arranging her questions into the most efficient order to get out of here as fast as humanly possible. There was already tea waiting for them when they reached their destination and settled down.

“So, you wrote in your letter to the Minister that there was a great number of Howlers impacting with your wards, being destroyed, on the 9th of April. Is that correct?” She hoped she would get away without tacking Lord onto every second sentence. Malfoy might have been a Lord of the Wizengamot, but she really didn’t like him much. Her mother’s bias in the past might have contributed to that, but it was a hard feeling to get rid of now.

“That is correct,” was the short but polite answer.

Dora would have loved to roll her eyes, but she had to be professional here. “Can you tell me who-all was here at that time?” She had started to compile lists of people present at the incidents in the hope of narrowing it down to a common target. The first attack on the Daily Prophet hadn’t helped much – too many people worked there – and there hadn’t been any people in the Minister’s office, or the antechamber, who also worked at the paper. Maybe a third group of people would help in finding a pattern.

“Besides my family, Healer Malcolm Greengrass, Curse-Breaker William Weasley, and Lord Slytherin were here.” He offered no explanation for that interesting mix of people, and Dora used her time writing those names down in her notebook to get her bearings back, thinking about what to ask next.

That wasn’t totally obvious or rude, anyway.

She knew she had been silent too long when he set his cup of tea down and sat back, lacing the fingers of his hands over his knee. “We have an old ritual room in the Manor, that we let friends of the family use from time to time. It really is a good place to meditate.” It was totally legal to have ritual rooms, but Dora just knew that the one here would have been put to nefarious uses. “Healer Greengrass studied abroad and knows a few unusual rituals for diagnostic purposes. Lord Slytherin said he wanted to get a check done that the curse of the past and the way he regained a body don’t have undesirable long-term effects.”

It almost sounded as if it could be true. She certainly would feel the need to check to make sure that everything was fine if she had been brought back by such an incompetent wizard as Pettigrew had been described to her. “Thank you for the information. Am I right to assume that all three of them stayed for longer than a few minutes before the Howlers arrived?”

“That was the case,” he nodded, still giving off an air of nonchalance.
“You also wrote that you would check for any Howlers which might have survived. Did you find one?” The text of the Howler Percy had frozen had been vague, angry rambling and threats addressed to the Minister, not really helpful in pinning down a reason for those attacks.

“I did not. The wards around the manor simply are too well crafted, I fear.” Sure he would say that, but she had to accept this, as they would not get permission to search the premises without the owner’s consent.

But maybe... “Would you allow some experts to search the boundaries of your wards for any possible hints?” There was no real harm in asking.

“I have no objections, but I think it would be a waste of your resources,” he agreed far too easily.

“Then I will send you an owl to arrange a date, Lord Malfoy.” There, she had been polite, and now it was time to leave. She had all she was going to get here for the moment. Next she would go talk with Bill. Maybe he could tell her more. She really was curious how that particular event could have taken place.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a bit of a struggle. I hope it turned out good enough.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Next chapter planned for 15th of March 2019

recommendation: The Historical Importance of Runic War Warding in the British Isles by samvelg on AO3; female Harry, sane Voldemort and banter as well as sassy-ness in abundance
Trouble

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your support, your comments and thoughts. I read them all (and use translation tools for languages I don’t know) and consider all sensible questions, suggestions, and ideas.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, 12th of April 1996

It was early, but as he was going to pick up his sons later in the day, he had decided to meet up with Amelia as soon as she said she would be in her office. She had been vague in her letter that had reached him the evening before and now Marvolo was pondering what she might have in mind that needed a meeting at the Ministry. The Wizengamot meeting of this month wasn’t for some time, and there wasn’t anything of great consequence planned for it anyway.

Greeting people recognising him with friendly nods, Marvolo made his way to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, quickly dodging a loudly protesting wizard pulled along by his arm by an annoyed-looking Auror as he stepped into the big office with its open floor plan.

Amelia was already there when Marvolo reached her office and knocked on the open door to make his presence known. “Good morning, Amelia.”

“Marvolo!” She said in surprise, looking up from something she had been reading on her desk. “You’re here early. But come in, sit down! Do you want tea?”

“Yes please.” Marvolo agreed, walking in and closing the door behind himself. With a ripple he felt the wards built into walls and door take effect. No one would be able to listen in on what they would be talking about.

Whatever that was going to be.

So Marvolo sat down, his casual robes and suit under them making sitting down pretty easy. Some of the more conservative cuts either were pretty restrictive, or they were so loosely cut – and usually were worn without any undergarments – that Marvolo preferred to wear the more modern open robes, or duelling robes specifically cut to allow as much movement as possible while also offering support to some parts of his anatomy.

When they both were comfortable and had a cup of tea, Marvolo added two more spoons of sugar to his tea, and fixed Amelia with a sharp look. “You were pretty unclear what exactly you wanted to talk with me about today, Amelia. So, what’s this about?” He took a sip of his tea and then decided that it could use a little more sugar still.

Amelia watched with a raised brow as he added another spoonful to the cup, not commenting on it, but leaning back in her chair. “I wanted to ask you to help me out with setting up a few training scenarios for the Auror training programme and maybe compose some for the final exam as well.”
For a moment Marvolo stared at Amelia, the spoon held aloft just before touching the saucer, trying to make sure he had heard correctly. Had the ritual messed with his perception of reality?

“I’m sorry. You want me to help write final exams and training missions?” He wasn’t sure if he remembered a time he had sounded that confused.

Amelia actually had the audacity to chuckle at him, and his half-hearted glare only served to escalate her chuckles to a short laugh. “I’m sorry, Marvolo. You look just too funny. It seems pretty far-fetched for me to ask you for help in this. But I think you actually are a pretty good candidate. For years the same people have written the exams and training scenarios. A few days ago I got confirmation that some of the younger Aurors seem to have been selling solutions of a kind to the new trainees. I had hoped you could shake things up a bit. Maybe even broaden the training a bit. You know more about what they might face should a new danger make an appearance.” She shrugged, picking up her own cup.

He settled back into his chair, placing the spoon down. “That sounds…” He blinked and thought this through as quickly as possible. It certainly would look good for the public, and would get him more influence, “intriguing, Amelia. Are you sure I’m qualified? And are there requirements for those exams that I would need to follow?” He couldn’t very well model those exams or training after what he had subjected prospective Death Eaters to, could he? Maybe a few, but not with the same focus on dark curses and the Unforgivables.

“There are a few standards that are checked in the final exam, and a few points included in different training scenarios. I can get you a copy of the lesson plans. But I want you to come up with something that’s out of the normal, a challenge.” Amelia looked smug, sipping at her tea.

Slowly shaking his head, Marvolo smirked. “What is the Minister going to say? And the other Department Heads? You’re sure this is a wise move?”

She gave a decisive nod. “I’m not aiming for the position as Minister. And this certainly is the best for the Auror Corps. So do you agree to help?”

He wasn’t really sure that this would work out, but it was something to do that wasn’t paperwork. That alone would have been a good reason to help. Besides the possible political gain, in influence and standing, of course.

“Then let me show you the list of typical topics covered in exams.” Amelia said, grinning like a cat that got the cream, as she got a roll of parchment out of a drawer of her desk.

Resigned to listening to a long explanation, Marvolo moved to have a better look at the writing.

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Tonks had picked up Bill from the front, and the two of them were walking past Madame Bones’ office when the door opened and Lord Slytherin stepped out, happily chatting with the Head of the DMLE.

“Marvolo!” Bill spoke up, drawing Lord Slytherin’s attention.

“Bill! Here to help in the search for the one – or the group – sending all those howlers?” the deceptively young-looking wizard asked of the wizard who was as young as he looked.
“Yes. Even though I’m not sure how I’ll be able to help, as I was inside the ritual room the whole time. But I’m not the auror here, am I?” Dora had to keep herself in check not to stand there with her mouth hanging open in shock at how familiar those two seemed to be with each other.

“Well, I don’t want to keep you from answering Auror Tonks’ questions then.” Slytherin turned back to Madame Bones where she stood in her office door. “I’ll send you my first drafts in a few days. Is that soon enough?”

Dora’s boss nodded with a smile. “That’s early enough, Marvolo. Don’t let us delay you.”

And before Dora could get herself fully under control again, Madame Bones had closed her door, Lord Slytherin had wandered off out of the Department, and Bill was grinning at her.

“Are you going to ask your questions right here?”

“No,” Dora shook her head, gesturing for him to start walking again. “We’ll go over to my desk.”

It was a short walk, but long enough for Dora to get her spinning thoughts to stop. It certainly seemed as if the one-formerly-known-as-Voldemort had managed to get a foot down to the ground. It seemed less and less likely that he was just playing at being reformed. But how this all added up was still a mystery. Maybe not being close to the man was the reason she still expected him to relapse into his old ways.

“Sit down,” she invited Bill with a wave at the visitor chair, before she let herself fall into her own chair, which moved a little. It was one of the fancier models with a hovering charm integrated. Not unlike the muggle office chair her father was using in his office at home. “Can you explain,” she waved an empty hand in the air, “all that to me? How did it happen that you were at Malfoy Manor?”

Bill took his wand in hand and waved a few runes into the air. Dora felt some wards settle into place but didn’t comment. With what she had learned as a member of the Order of the Phoenix she knew there was reason to be cautious.

“I was there to help Marvolo with a ritual. He came to me asking for a second opinion. As I have worked with the goblins and in Egypt, he knew I have insight that would be helpful.” What did Egypt have to do with all that? Malfoy had said that it had been a ritual to make sure there were no lingering ill effects… had this to do with horcruxes?

Bill continued to speak, probably having a lot of answers he wasn’t willing to give in any way usable in court. She would have to draw her conclusions from his vague hints. “He helped me clean up the old cottage Sirius owns in France. You learn a lot about someone when you work together that closely in such a dangerous place. I hadn’t had that much fun since I switched to a desk job in London. And helping with this will benefit Harry in the end.”

At that Dora looked up, meeting Bill’s steady gaze.

Helping Harry.

With a cold feeling running down her spine, she remembered how the Headmaster had told the whole order of his suspicion that Harry was a horcrux and needed to die before Voldemort could be killed permanently. “By helping Lord Slytherin to monitor his health, you help the children he has adopted?” This question in her report wouldn’t raise any questions with her colleagues. They really should keep the existence of the horcruxes from the greater public. Those still unhappy with the second chance for the man might target Harry if they knew.
“Exactly.” Bill nodded with a smile. “And getting the input of a curse-breaker and a healer who has been learning the old diagnostic and healing rituals is only sensible. After all, Lord Slytherin was subjected to an ancient and mostly forgotten curse, and then resurrected through a newly adapted ritual.” Dora was sure there were a lot of hints in that explanation that she might not pick up on. But there were enough she could see clearly.

Bill was working on creating a ritual that somehow would help Harry in getting a piece of soul stuck in his forehead out without hurting him.

She was good with that.

With the why explained, Dora switched her questions over to a probably useless line. “Did you get any howlers in the last few days?”

Bill shook his head. “No, nothing. I didn’t even know about those howlers until Lucius Malfoy came to ask if they had a negative influence on the ritual.”

“Do you know of any reason why someone might want to send you a howler?”

“Not really. Maybe if someone knew of the kind of friendship between Marvolo and me. But until now, almost no one even had an inkling about it.” Bill shrugged.

Dora nodded. She hadn’t expected that Bill would help her understand the one sending all those howlers. But he had been able to explain to her what had been going on at Malfoy Manor that day.

“Thank you, Mr. Weasley. I’ll be in contact if there should be any more questions.” They both rolled their eyes at that cliché closing line of an interrogation.

“You’re welcome. I’m happy to help,” Bill said, stood, and blinked before he left.

With a sigh Dora got out a form and started to fill in the information from the short conversation she just had had. Maybe the spell for fingerprints would yield some results. She could use some new leads.

“...I don’t wanna leave!” Harry made a grimace at the heights Marcus’ voice could reach seemingly without even trying. Marcus had been the first to leave for breakfast, and now Harry stood here at the top of the stairs right next to Enora and Nawel.

The twins weren’t really looking happy either. The three of them looked at each other, as Marcus started to scream over Sirius’ attempt to soothe him. Two pairs of brown eyes and one pair of green met, all of them unhappy with the idea of going down to join the others.

Nawel tilted her head to the side, flinching as something sounding like glass broke downstairs, and mimed for Harry and her sister to follow her, carefully placing her left foot on the first step.

Not really sure what Nawel was planning, Harry followed her down the stairs carefully, glad that they had been repaired so not one of them made a sound as the three of them tiptoed down. At the foot of the stairs Nawel turned away from the room they normally ate in and towards the way to the garden. Harry and Enora followed.
Waiting in the garden until Marcus had calmed down sounded like a good idea to Harry. Maybe it was cowardly of him to avoid his little brother while he was having a big tantrum. But Harry was pretty sure he had no idea how to help and didn’t wish to make it any worse. So he followed the twins to the backdoor and out into the garden.

When the girls walked to the edge of the property and Marcus was still easy to hear, Nawel ducked under one branch of a small tree – slipping through a small gap in the fence right at the trunk – and left the garden for a stretch of wild meadow, heading for another hedge which was surrounding another house, judging by the roof that Harry could see. He hesitated a fraction of a second at the edge of the property. The wards did end here. But who even knew that he was here in France? Why should there be any risk?

Enora followed her sister through the hole in the fence, giving Harry a mischievous grin as she slipped by him.

Trying to convince himself that there was no need to be a stick in the mud – there was no one around who could pose a problem – Harry slipped through the pretty narrow gap and fell into a short run to catch up to the girls. “Where are you going? We can’t just go into somebody else’s garden.”

“Haven’t you noticed that there is no one here besides us?” Nawel said over her shoulder, not slowing down.

Harry had to agree that it looked like there weren’t many people around here. For one thing, the houses stood wide apart, and all of them were summer homes, as it was spring the homes were empty.

That was also pretty obvious in the garden they entered. The grass was long, the beds unkempt, old half-rotten leaves were piling up in several places, and a tarp was draped over something large. Nawel walked over to the big structure, pulling on the tarp. “Come on help me, you two.”

Enora picked up one edge the moment her sister asked her to help. Harry once again hesitated, before doing the same. He wasn’t really keen to sit on the slightly damp grass. As long as it was, it would take longer to dry, if it even did.

They folded the tarp roughly and sat down on the three-seater swing that was comfortable enough, even without the pads, that they could stay a while.

“How long do we stay? We didn’t get any breakfast,” Harry asked, feeling that Ron would mock him for being unhappy with leaving the warded area without telling an adult, but his friend probably would agree with his wish to have a hearty breakfast.

“A while,” Nawel answered, kicking her legs carelessly, the picture of unconcerned laziness.

“Are you in a hurry?” Enora wanted to know.

Harry shrugged, feeling awkward. It had been a while since he had disregarded the rules. And even then it mostly had been to get something to eat at the Dursleys’, or to help someone out each year at Hogwarts.

“Will we see you again over the summer?” Enora asked, just dismissing the question of if and when they were going to go back to the cottage.

Harry shrugged. “I’m sure that I’ll visit my godfather over the holidays. We surely can coordinate our visits to see each other if you want.” It had been fun spending time with the two, and it would
probably be fun to get to know them better.

“Is there a place in London you think we should visit?” Enora asked, clearly sensing the tension in the air and trying to defuse it.

“There's Diagon Alley. The shops there are great. I especially like the ice-cream parlour. I’ve never seen more different and crazier flavours in one place! I did spend several weeks there just before my third year. And my owl Hedwig is from one of the shops there.” Harry really wished he could find the words to adequately describe how great it had been to walk into Diagon Alley for the very first time. Or how much fun it had been to stay in the Leaky Cauldron all on his own, freed from his relatives. But without the proper words, he shrugged again. “Knockturn Alley is there as well, but I’m pretty sure your mother wouldn’t be happy to have you explore there. That area has a really bad reputation.” He shrugged again, not feeling all that comfortable. Why had he agreed to come here?

“And how is the house there in London? Sirius said that he is still working on repairs and stuff.” Nawel asked next, flipping her braids over her shoulder.

“It’s old.” How to describe the house without making it sound too bad? “And it was standing empty for years before Sirius moved in. He's already done a lot. But he started with the rooms most frequently used. So there is still a lot more to do.”

Birds were singing in a hedge near them, and there was a sweet fragrance of spring flowers in the air. The sun was warming their spot nicely. And despite all that, Harry was tense and trying to ignore the feeling. It probably was because he was breaking the rules for the first time since… it felt like an eternity.

“Sirius told us. Asked what colours we want for our rooms there. He also said that you repaired the tapestry. How did you do that? I heard that such things are really complicated to create and even harder to repair.”

Harry remembered all the different people Sirius had asked and nodded. “Yes, all the experts told Sirius to just get a new one. But despite the fact that his mother had burned him and others on it off, he wanted it to be repaired.” Now that he had said it Harry wondered why Sirius hadn’t started with a new tapestry, but had wanted the old one repaired. “When I was visiting over Christmas he let me test something. It worked.” Harry shrugged again, feeling foolish doing it so often.

Enora moved her upper body so that her elbows rested on her knees, her eyes fixed on Harry. “And what did you test? Come on! It sounds as if you managed a miracle. But Sirius didn’t want to explain.” She put on a puppy face, with big eyes, that was so like the look Sirius could pull off that Harry had to grin against his better judgement.

Did he want to share this?

“Parselmagic. I have been reading about it since my last birthday. It’s family magic, and heavily based on intent and carefully picking the right words. I had the clear intent to restore the tapestry to what it had been before it had been damaged. So it was repaired again.” Harry shrugged, a little smug that he had managed that feat of magic, but also not really all that sure that he should talk about family magic. On the other hand, if he wasn't supposed to talk about it, he wouldn’t have been able to do so anyway. Maybe the general terms he had used were fine.

“Can you show us?” Nawel asked also moving forward so she had a better view.

Could he show them? The colour changing wasn’t all that difficult. But Marvolo had insisted that
Harry wasn’t to experiment without competent adult supervision.

“We’re outside the wards. There’s a chance that the magic will be picked up. I don’t think I should.” And he really shouldn’t. There was a good reason why Marvolo had said Harry shouldn’t experiment on his own.

Before either twin could start wheedling as he could clearly see they wanted to, the screech of an owl drew their gaze towards the other end of the garden wilderness. It looked as if the owl was carrying a red envelope and as if it was flying in their direction.

Harry stiffened, and moved to draw his wand. That red was one he had seen before.

Everytime a student had gotten a letter from an angry parent as convinced as Mrs. Weasley that publicly shaming their children was a good way to make them regret whatever they had done, a letter in that particular shade of red had done the screaming.

“Shit!” Harry said with feeling, standing from the swing and moving away from the twins. It seemed as if the lunatic sending all those howlers might have been aiming for him as well. Because who else could possibly have a reason to send him a howler?

The owl changed course slightly and closed in on him, then let the howler drop right over Harry’s head.

And then it started screaming.

“How can you just forget that he killed your parents? Killed so many people! How can it be that everyone has forgotten? He’s a danger! He needs to be killed! And you, Harry Potter, are close enough to get it done!” When the howler ripped itself apart and exploded, a shield spell flared up around Harry, so he was only pushed to the ground and not flung across the garden like one of the empty flower pots.

“Merde!” Enora called out, and before Harry could catch up to what was happening, the three of them had run almost back to the Black summer cottage.

Harry was the first to slip through the gap and looked up, happy to be back under the protection of the excellent wards.

Just a moment later Harry registered that there were people in the garden. Beside Remus and Sirius, as well as the twins’ mother, Marvolo was standing there, carrying Marcus in his arms, a dark look in his blue eyes.

Harry felt himself blush, then looked down at his shoes – muddy after that run over the meadow – clenching his fists.

Great.

Now he had done it. Gotten himself into trouble. Again. Real trouble.

“Harry, where have you been?” Marvolo asked, his voice so mild that Harry just knew he had to be furious. Behind Harry the leaves of the tree rustled. “We were worried. You three vanished without informing anyone.” Harry moved his hand to grab the pendant he was wearing all the time. Marvolo clearly had been using the spell on the pendant to locate him. “Why are you out of breath and so pale?” There was worry in that voice.
Harry swallowed and looked over his shoulder to see Enora and Nawel stand there, looking a little puzzled. He turned back and stood tall. “We left for one of the neighbouring properties. Wanted to get away from the noise for a few moments.” It had been a bad idea from the start. How Harry wished he had stayed in the garden. “We didn’t go all that far. Then there was an owl, delivering a howler. It exploded. But the shield protected me. We ran back.” Harry shrugged and let go of the pendant.

“I see,” Marvolo said. “Is one of you injured?” Harry shook his head and assumed the others did the same, as Marvolo didn’t set Marcus down to reach for his wand. “Good. Lord Black, I’m sorry to cut the day short, but I hope you understand that I want to get my sons home.”

“I do understand that,” Sirius said, and Harry looked up in surprise. Sirius, one of the Marauders, behaving like a responsible adult? “I’m sure Harry didn’t want to cause any distress.”

Marvolo heaved a breath. “I know. But the fact that a howler was able to reach him at all, is reason for concern. He also is the only one who got to hear the howler. Or did it explode without saying anything?”

Harry looked up again – somehow his shoes did attract his gaze like magnets did iron – and answered in a small voice. “I did hear the content. As did Enora and Nawel. It was angry and male, I think.”

“Then we have to talk with the Aurors,” Marvolo stated before turning. “Say your farewells, Harry. We’ll be leaving in a few moments.”

Harry did as instructed. His stomach was doing funny somersaults. And the murmured “All will be well, cub,” from Sirius did little to soothe his nerves.

He really had been stupid.

ooOoo

On arriving at Griffin House Marvolo had sent Harry to wait in the study. He needed to calm down before he spoke with his older son about what had happened today.

“You go with Mrs. Peters and take a bath,” Marvolo said to Marcus, who was looking as if he would fall asleep any moment now. “And then you can request a story, and take a nap.” Marcus nodded, yawning, and Marvolo stood, inclining his head towards the nanny.

Marvolo watched as his young son followed his nanny up the stairs, looking back over his shoulder to check if his dad – it felt oddly nice being called that – was still there. Marvolo used the time it took Marcus to get up to the next floor to go through a few breathing exercises to calm down. When he had arrived at the Cottage – right after his meeting with Amelia at the Ministry – and Harry had been missing… The last time he had felt such a spike of fear… that probably had been the fraction of a second as his own curse had been heading his way in a flash of green.

But he really had to be reasonable about this. Harry hadn’t done anything really dangerous. He only had walked over to another garden. When he thought back to his own time at Hogwarts in his fifth year, and what all the others had been experimenting with, then Harry was almost too innocent. They had played with dark magic, had experimented with potions, recreational and poisonous. He had killed.
Really, sneaking out from the wards was harmless in comparison.

Hopefully he would remember that in a few moments.

Stepping into the study, Marvolo found a pacing Harry and the concerned looking portrait of Charlus Potter. Marvolo closed the door behind himself and cleared his throat as the carpet was too effective in dampening the sound of steps and he had no desire to startle his son by appearing behind him suddenly.

“I’m sorry! I know it was stupid to leave the wards. But I somehow didn’t want to be a bore, and it was easier to follow Enora and Nawel than speak up. And I didn’t see the risk. There was no one around, no one knew I was there. But what should have happened? And then… I know I was behaving irresponsibly. I broke the rules. Please don’t punish the twins! They didn’t do anything wrong! And, I don’t want to make excuses, but nothing really happened anything. Right? No one was injured…” Harry suddenly stopped, hands balled into fists at his sides, words struggling to be said.

“Take a deep breath, Harry,” Marvolo instructed, doing the same. Then he placed a hand on his son’s shoulder and guided him over to one of the chairs, sitting down in the other.

For a moment there was silence, only the crackling of the fire making a sound.

Calling to mind what he had planned to do, Marvolo carefully started to speak. “You did break the rules. You left without informing your godfather. And you knew that there was danger afoot.” He took another deep breath, working to keep his temper in check and not yell at his son who obviously already felt guilty. “You’re grounded for the rest of the holidays.” That wasn’t really all that long, but it would be enough in light of the situation. “And I’ll inform Amelia Bones about your encounter with the howler. I’m pretty sure she’ll want to talk with you. If that is the case, you’ll be allowed to go make a statement. Outside of meals, you’re going to stay in your room. And I want you to write me an essay. Why you went against the rules knowing them full well, and what you could have done differently. Any questions?”

Harry slumped down in his chair, all tension leaving him. “No, sir.”

Marvolo felt odd. There was a need he couldn’t quite identify. Harry was here, he was healthy. Was he still worried?

“I’m happy that you’re well, Harry.” Why was it so hard to say something simple like that?

And suddenly he had an arm full of shaking teenager. Marvolo tightened the hug, and the odd feeling gave way to something more pleasant. Relief. Maybe because his son wasn’t cross with him, or because he held the proof of Harry’s wellbeing in his arms.

“I’m sorry I made you worry,” Harry mumbled into Marvolo’s shoulder, tightening his hug some more.

ooOoo

“I is sorry, Master Marvolo,” Flimm spoke up haltingly turning the little paper over in his hands again and again.
“What is it, Flimm?” the wizard asked without looking up from his desk where he was working on something. Maybe a letter.

“Young Master Harry asked Flimm to bring a letter to young Miss Luna.” That made the wizard look up.

“He ordered you to play owl?” the wizard asked with a raised brow.

“Young Master Harry asked, politely.” Master Harry always asked. It was nice.

“Do you have other tasks?”

There always was something to clean, plants to tend to, but this was something new. “Nothing, Master Marvolo, sir.”

“Then by all means, you have my blessing to play owl for my son.” There was a small smile on the Master’s face and Flimm gave a bow before popping over the the funny shaped house to deliver his small burden. He was pretty sure that he would make this journey several more times this day.

ooooOOooo

Saturday, 13th of April 1996

Dora watched as Harry walked into the open-floor-plan office, closely followed by Lord Slytherin. Harry looked sullen. Not a look Dora had expected to see on a student’s face in the middle of the spring holidays. But considering that it was his fifth year, and OWLs were just around the corner, that face might be connected to that.

“Thank you for coming, Lord Slytherin, Harry,” Dora greeted the two, standing from her chair. Harry flashed her a short grin, and she would have sworn Lord Slytherin rolled his eyes at her.

“As my son has important information for your case, it is only right for him to come here and answer your questions,” Slytherin informed her, conjuring himself a second visitor chair with a short flick of his wand. Talk around the teapot and coffee table had informed her how many of the older Aurors felt about that wand. They all claimed the sight of it made cold shivers run down their backs. She didn’t have that problem, but it was a distinctive wand.

They all sat down, and Dora activated the privacy wards before getting out a form to write down the testimony. Doing that after the fact had proven to be harder than necessary. Maybe doing it at the same time would be better.

“What can you tell me about the howler?” Dora asked, concentrating on Harry while trying to ignore the looming presence of Lord Slytherin.

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes, visibly relaxing his muscles in shoulders and arms. Then he opened his eyes again and started to talk. “I was outside the wards, not really long, but I guess it made it possible for the owl to find me directly.” The boy took another deep breath and Dora realised that he was using breathing exercises taught in preparation for Occlumency training. Intriguing.
“The voice was male. He was yelling. But I guess that’s pretty normal for a howler. Isn’t it?”

“It is,” Dora said with a nod, hoping to keep Harry’s recollection going by quelching any hint of doubt.

“I can give you the exact words. It wasn’t long, and father helped me make a memory copy of it. In essence, it claimed that I should kill father. He was angry that everyone seems to have forgotten about the past. Stressed that people had been killed… Tried to make me feel guilty.” Harry fell silent, flexing his hands into fists repeatedly.

Dora set down her quill and reached a hand out to her young friend. Behind him Lord Slytherin was unusually pale. Was he feeling guilty as well? “You have done nothing wrong, Harry. The laws are clear on that, and the Wizengamot’s decision was as well.” Patting Harry’s arm awkwardly, Dora sat back in her chair, picking her quill back up.

What a dirty trick, guilting a teenager with the intent to make them hurt another human being.

“Do you remember anything about the owl? Anything unusual about it?” Better get this over with quickly, so that Harry could return home.

“No. Nothing special at all. Just like all the owls at school. Average size, brown. It was gone too quickly.” Harry shrugged.

“No worries. If the memory contains the delivery as well, I can get a good look at the owl. Do you have the copy here?” She directed this question to Slytherin in the assumption that he would have a phial or other container with the memory in it on himself.

And he did indeed slip his hand into his robes, holding a small crystal phial in his hand when he pulled it out again. “I have, and it does include the owl. But I have to agree with Harry, it was a pretty ordinary post owl.” The phial was levitated over to her and she added a label to the phial and added a reference to the form.

“I think that that’s everything? Do you want to tell me anything else?” Dora waited for a moment but got only a shake of Harry’s head as an answer. “Well, then you can go. But I ask that you inform me if you remember anything else, okay, Harry?”

“Okay,” Harry said with a sad smile, before standing like Slytherin. The messy-haired teenager turned to his adoptive father. “I guess that means back to my room again?”

Dora blinked and was on the verge of asking what that was about when she noted a sad smile on Slytherin’s face as well.

“You broke the rules, and grounding is the punishment for leaving the wards while you knew there was danger afoot. So yes, back to your room once we are home. I still am waiting for that essay.” Harry groaned but didn’t protest, which made Dora kind of happy. That looked like any normal parent-child relationship.

Harry waved in farewell. “Hope that’ll help, Tonks. Even though I don’t feel very helpful at the moment.”

Dora smiled at him. “Every bit is helpful. Now I have confirmation that it’s a male, and that Lord Slytherin is the likely target. That’s a lot of information, Harry. Don’t feel bad.”

She watched Harry and his adoptive father leave, feeling better about the whole adoption business.
The weather was nice like most days, and Albus ate his lunch – a dish he hadn’t had before which was built around chickpeas – listening to a lively discussion about the finer points of cricket two of his table neighbours were engaging in.

By now the healers were rather happy with Albus’ progress, and Albus himself was feeling much better. He took potions regularly and spent time with various activities – meditation, walks around the grounds and the like – that were offered and guided by the staff. He wouldn’t be returning to Britain, but he would have a nice quiet life here, in Egypt.

An owl screeched, and everyone looked up to where the noise was coming from. It let go of a violently red envelope, which hovered near Albus and formed an angry mouth, starting to shout. “YOU HAVE FAILED US! YOU SHOULD HAVE ACTED AS YOU DID THEN! I TRUSTED YOU! NOW THAT YOU HAVE ABANDONED US, ALBUS, I’LL HAVE TO ACT! YOU’RE USELESS!”

With that last word the letter, a howler – it had been some time since Albus had gotten one of those – didn’t rip itself to shreds as they normally did, but exploded.

Then people started screaming and running. Albus himself sat there with his ears ringing, trying to make sense of that howler.

Who had sent it? And why?

“Mr. Dumbledore?” Albus turned only now noticing that someone had tried to gain his attention for a while now.

“Yes?” It seemed as if he had lost more time than he had thought. The gardens where they often ate their midday-meal was almost empty by now. Someone, most likely healers and medi-witches and wizards, had herded the others back into the buildings.

“I asked if you were feeling well.” There was concern in the voice of the young healer at his side, making Albus smile.

“The ringing in my ears is almost gone. I hope no one was injured?” Realising that it could very well happened, Albus turned on his bench to look more directly at the healer and not out over the garden.

“A few slight burns because hot food was spilled. Nothing that wasn’t easy to treat. The Administrator asked me to get your confirmation that the authorities need to be informed about this howler. It sounded vaguely threatening to me.”

Albus nodded, his eyes once more wandering over the well tended gardens. “Yes, that was most unpleasant. That explosion could have done actual harm.” He frowned. “A normal howler doesn’t act that way.”
After the more or less excited morning, Harry sat in his room at Griffin House and was writing. Not the essay Marvolo had demand he write as part of his punishment, but a much shorter missive he was going to send to Luna.

His essay was long finished, coming to the conclusion that it had been peer pressure that had led to him leaving the wards. Harry hadn’t wanted to give a cowardly, boring explanation with Enora and Nawel. So he went along with their plan, even though he knew it wasn’t all that good an idea. He even had been actively searching for an excuse why it wasn’t the dumbest thing he had ever done.

He had sat there, quill hovering over the parchment, for quite a while as he realized that he hadn’t run into this situation at Hogwarts because all the people he interacted with and actually wanted to think good of him, knew of the rules and dangers and didn’t tempt him.

If Ron was any more of a rule breaker and the others not so efficient at keeping him in line, he probably would have broken more rules.

Not for the first time that afternoon Harry shook himself to wrench his thoughts away from that path. Marvolo wasn't making it hard for Harry to follow the rules – like providing guards so he could go to Hogsmeade with his friends – and that he now was sitting here, only allowed out for meals was, his own damn fault.

Harry dipped his quill into the dark blue ink he was writing with and continued his note to Luna after going over what he had so far.

*Being stuck in my room certainly isn’t all that bad. I can’t fly, that’s true, but I can read, and write to you. And the holidays aren’t that long anymore. We’ll both be back at Hogwarts soon. And even with the ramping up of exam preparations we’ll spent time together. I’m looking forward to that.*

*It’s nice that your father has taken you exploring the woods in Ireland. Did you find what you were looking for? Maybe you can send me a sketch? Beside writing with you, I’ll work on my drawing skills.*

Harry set to drawing a little sketch of Flimm with a letter at the end of his note, more or less carelessly shoving a number of notes to the ground. The whole desk was covered in them. They had been writing back and forth, sending sketches and short stories to the other. Luna was a great girlfriend, supporting him in his grounding.

Flimm seemed oddly happy about popping back and forth between Luna’s and Harry’s homes, playing owl. It was much faster than sending Hedwig, who was on her way delivering letters to Hermione and Ron anyway. It was sad that he wouldn’t be able to visit with his friends, but once again he was the only one to blame for that.

“What cans Flimm do for young Master Harry?” the elf asked after appearing in the room, as he had done every time Harry had called on him. By now Harry was reasonably sure the elf was having a lot of fun pretending not to know what it was that Harry wanted from him.
“If you have the time, could you please bring this note to Luna and wait for a reply?” There was a small twinkle in the big eyes of the elf and Harry was sure that Flimm amused himself with making Harry squirm.

“Flimm can does that, young Master Harry.” Flimm accepted the note and with another popping sound was gone from the room.

Harry got up from his chair, pacing the length of the room as well as was possible. By now he wished he could go out and fly a few rounds in the garden. At the moment neither Marvolo nor Marcus were even at the house.

No one would notice.

Marvolo had taken Marcus to Potter Manor to show him how to fly a broom on the grounds there. Harry wished he could be there, but he understood that Marcus really needed something to distract him from the fact that Harry wasn’t allowed to play with him in the garden.

He probably could go flying and be back in his room before his father and brother were back home, but Harry knew that it was a really bad idea.

Back at the Dursleys' it had been easier to stay in his room. But maybe that was because there was nowhere else he would rather have been, or would have done. Staying in his room always also meant staying away from Dudley, his aunt, and uncle.

Now the situation was different.

With a deep sigh, Harry let himself drop onto the bed, sitting down, and then threw himself back with his arms over his head so he was lying on the bed.

There might not be a lot of days left in the holidays, but he was sure even History with Binns would be a welcome change after being grounded.

Chapter End Notes

BlackSky83 brought up the idea of Harry getting in trouble with Marvolo, and I had a bit of trouble finding a spot where it would fit. I hope this feels natural and not forced.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Chapter Notes

Some statistics. In my edition of book five this chapter takes us to around page 784 of 1021. Still some more to come, but so far off from the original :D have fun with the new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, 13th of April 1996

It was rather late already and all his friends would have to leave soon, but for the moment they all were sitting on the various surfaces in the parlour nearest to his room. Theo was looking forward to being back at Hogwarts, even as the dreaded OWLs came closer and closer.

“Pass the pastries, please?” Vincent asked of Draco, who did so without commenting on the fact that a plate of small cubes of fudge was already next to him and Gregory where they were sitting, listlessly leaving through some older Quidditch magazines.

“How was your holiday?” Pansy asked of Daphne, after finishing her own account of her holiday, which had been pretty boring, as she had spent most of it at home preparing for the exams coming up.

“It was nice, if stressful. Do you know what exactly Harry did, Theo, to not be allowed to come?” Daphne suddenly asked from where she was sitting in a wingback chair, her legs dangling over the armrest, not exactly being subtle about changing the topic.

Theo gave her an unimpressed look. “He wrote that he left the wards around the summer home of his godfather, without telling an adult. And with that Howler stuff happening.” Theo shrugged.

Harry had written more in response to Theo’s invitation to this afternoon among friends, but Theo wasn’t about to share what his friend had written him in confidence. “It was inevitable that he would break one of the rules again. I think being grounded for the last three days of the holidays is a mild punishment.” That got a lot of agreeing noises from around the room, but not from Draco.

“I don’t know. Leaving the wards? We all did something like that thousands of times. Didn’t we? When I was younger i didn’t realise that there was an alarm every time I crossed the wardline. I never was punished for it. Were any of you?”

“But you were back quick. Right?” Pansy said, giving Daphne an eye-roll, earning herself a stuck-out tongue. “And there was no big target painted on your chest. Well, not as big a target as on Harry. And you were close to your own home. I think the situation now for Harry is different. There was more than one attack on him this school year!”

Theo nodded, as she was right. After all, the attacks on Harry had led him to ask for a re-sort in the first place. “Considering Lord Slytherin's reputation I would say being grounded sounds like a fair punishment to me.” He shrugged and noted with curiosity how Draco paled.
“Dad did tell some pretty gruesome stories.” Gregory suddenly put in, picking up the last pastry, not even looking up from his magazine.

Not one of them said more to that. There really wasn’t much point. They all had known for a long time now that the Dark Lord was a demanding master, and one fond of harsh punishments for minor infractions. Theo had nearly forgotten that Harry’s adoptive father and the Dark Lord were the same man.

“Come on, Daphne, tell us how your holidays have been! Clearly something interesting did happen for you to react by deflecting so clumsily,” Pansy steered the topic back to her friend and away from the absent Harry.

Daphne groaned, letting her head fall back. “You won’t shut up until I tell you, right?”

With a smug grin Pansy nodded, sitting up straight as she did in Potions, paying attention in an exaggerated manner. Daphne rolled her eyes, and moved to sit a little straighter herself. “You all know that we went to a lot of events all over the continent, right?” They nodded dutifully. “On one of those events there was an old Tahitian Warlock with his apprentice. He’s around our age.”

Draco quipped “Who, the warlock?” and got an evil eye for his trouble. Theo grinned.

“And far travelled. My parents were really happy when they noticed that he and I talked for quite some time.” Her smile got an edge – Theo was sure it was sharp enough to cut dragonhide – and her posture relaxed. “I’m curious what they will think once they learn that his parents are muggles. Diplomats. They were working in Australia, and on vacation, when their son had the first bout of accidental magic. The Warlock was there and saw everything. He has been teaching John the whole time since then.”

Theo felt one of his brows wing up at Daphne’s enthusiasm over the idea of her parents learning that they had given their permission for her to explore the possibility of a marriage with a muggle-born wizard.

“And you think it’s a good idea to not tell your parents?” Pansy wanted to know, an intense expression on her face, which Theo assumed was equal parts worry for a friend and curiosity.

Daphne shrugged. “He grew up with magic just like any of us. Got taught much more than any of us.” She made a sweeping hand gesture indicating them all, and all the others they went to school with. “He has travelled the world both with his parents and his master. He’s not the heir to a big family somewhere, he's neither too old, too young, or too stupid to be an interesting partner.” She shrugged again, clearly trying to project an image of relaxed disregard of her parents’ likely disapproval.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Daphne,” Theo ended this weird cross between bragging and an interrogation, quickly thinking where to steer the conversation next. “Have you all prepared for the mandatory career advice meetings with Professor Snape?”

Draco rolled his eyes – well, maybe that had been as transparent a diversion as Daphne’s earlier – and answered. “I want to confirm that my information on the requirements for a Potions Mastery program is still accurate. Maybe he can give me some hints on which Master to approach for an apprenticeship. Not sure yet if I want to go with the more formal arrangement. It’s more restricting, but also traditional, so I’m a little torn.”

They went down the niffler burrow talking about different careers they were thinking of pursuing before they had to take over family responsibilities. Theo himself wasn’t all that sure, but
considered curse-breaking, or enchanting objects, as likely possibilities.

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Marvolo was staring down on the parchment laying on his desk, quill poised to write, unable to concentrate. On the big wingback chair next to the fire, Marcus sat on Harry’s lap, listening attentively to the story Harry was reading him.

Giving writing his proposal up as a bad job for now, Marvolo looked up to where Marcus had his head resting against Harry’s shoulder, Nagini curled around the legs of the wingback chair, her head up on Harry’s knee, as if she was listening.

“Amused, Babbitty agreed to help the muggle king in his wish to appear being able to wield magic. Declaring that she would hide in a bush, making the magic work.” Harry gave his best to make the reading of the fairytale as dramatic as possible, having a captivated audience in Marcus, who loved it whenever Marvolo read him a story – so almost every evening – doing different voices for the different characters in the story. *The Fountain of Fair Fortune* still was the favourite. In fact Marvolo had read it out loud so many times by now that he was sure if someone was to wake him in the middle of the night asking him to read *The Fountain of Fair Fortune* he would be able to do so without ever waking up properly.

As the story progressed and the statue was erected in remembrance of the proclamation of no harm ever again to magicals – and wouldn’t that be a wish come true? – Marcus was almost asleep in his brother’s arms.

With a smile on his face, Marvolo stood from his chair – placing the quill on the gilded tray next to the inkwell – and silently walked over to where Harry was struggling to manage the book, Nagini, and his little brother.

“Let me help you,” he said, taking the book from Harry and levitating it over to its usual place on a shelf, before bending his knees and back so he could more easily pick his younger son up from his slouched position on Harry’s lap.

“Thanks,” Harry breathed back, a somewhat forlorn look on his face as he watched Marvolo adjust his hands to hold Marcus more securely.

Tomorrow they would eat breakfast together and then they would take Harry to Kings Cross so he could board the Hogwarts Express to return to the castle. The last part of the school year was before them, and then the summer.

As Marvolo walked up the stairs, Harry following them, and Marcus snuggled close one hand clutching at the fine woollen robes, he recapitulated his plans. He wanted to perfect the ritual for the Horcrux extraction so that his son could go into his sixth year without the fragment of another’s soul lodged in his head. And he wanted to slowly progress on the political stage – slow more out of necessity than preference – as well as finish the book he was working on. There was no need to hurry on the book and other plans were more important, but it still was something he wanted to make constant progress on.

Settling his little boy into the bed in Marcus’ room – he had been ready for bed before Harry started reading that story – Marvolo sighed. Tomorrow had the potential to become a stressful day.
Marcus probably would be really unhappy with Harry's leaving again for school. In fact, it could go either way. How Marcus would react to a thing was really hard to predict. Relatively often Marvolo had thought Marcus would throw a tantrum over something just for it not to happen, and the other way around.

Marcus snuggled his snake plushy when Marvolo tucked him in under the blankets, before leaving the room to find Harry standing at the door. “Happy that grounding is over?” he asked, grinning a little.

Harry rolled his eyes, and mock glared. “Haha, very funny. I’m kind of looking forward to meeting my friends again. But on the other hand, there’s a lot of revision and stress coming up. Not really looking forward to that, if I’m honest.”

Marvolo closed the door – which made a slight sound as the latched slipped into place – and turned to look at Harry. “Will it make you feel better when I ask for your help over the first few weeks of summer to revise? I plan to take a few more OWLs and the NEWTs to the OWLs I already have, and revising with you would be helpful.”

Marvolo could see the moment when the initial confusion – clearly visible on Harry’s face – change with dawning realisation when his son remembered that Dumbledore had made sure he would lose all his academic achievements in his new start as a citizen.

“Sure!” Harry agreed, and then grinned. “What do I get if I make notes on the questions we get asked during the exams?”

That made Marvolo laugh out loud, quickly muffling the sound with a hand as to not wake Marcus. “Depends on the quality, I would say.” He gave his son a quick hug, and then a light shove in direction of the boy’s room. “Go check if you have packed everything, and then go to bed. We’ll have to get up early tomorrow.”

“I know that it’s late, but could you go over a few ideas with me?” Harry asked. “Enora and Nawel asked me about how I repaired the tapestry, and then with the howler, I thought about how to protect Marcus in a situation like that, and well... is there a safe way to use Parselmagic to defend someone?”

Had he ever explored that part of their family magic? Marvolo wasn’t really sure. He certainly had found ways to attack someone else – in a sense that was a way to defend himself and others – but after his initial search into useful everyday applications, he had concentrated on its uses in rituals and warding. “We certainly can discuss your ideas. And I’ll investigate. But it’s unlikely that we’ll try anything today.”

Harry grinned, happy, where Marvolo had half expected him to be disappointed or angry because they hadn’t found the time to do more before this evening. “I’ll get ready for bed, check my trunk, and then come down to the study?”

Thinking back to his abandoned paperwork, Marvolo sighed and nodded. “I’ll try to get a little more work done.”

Harry laughed and hurried into his room, not noticing the ineffective – and not serious anyway – glare sent his way. With a huff of breath Marvolo turned to walk down the stairs and back to the parlour, Nagini slithering in his wake, probably headed for the nice rug in front of the fire.
Sunday, 14th of April 1996

It was kind of surreal sending his daughters off to school barely days after he had gained confirmation that they really were his daughters.

Gently placing the last piece of luggage he had levitated out of the house down in the boot of the car, Sirius looked up to where Olivienne and the girls had just left the cottage, speaking to Remus. His old friend handed over the papers and keys to the car, as he had been the one to collect the rented car from the next bigger city. Apparation had its advantages, but neither of them would be able to apparate all the way to Paris more than once, and even less with a passenger.

“I hope you’ll have a pleasant drive. The weather isn’t too bad for a long journey by car.” Sirius wanted to kick himself in the… behind, for such a useless comment. It was true, the day cloudy but dry, but the remark wasn’t really something he felt was appropriate in their situation. Shouldn’t he say something deep and profound?

“It will work. I am sure,” Olivienne said, rolling her eyes at him, walking over to the driver’s door, followed by the two girls.

Now the moment had come and Sirius felt a big lump forming in his throat. Sternly admonishing himself not to flee into weak jokes as he had done so often in the past, Sirius opened his arms in an offer of a hug. Just a moment later his arms were full with his two girls, embracing him with fervour.

He was a truly lucky man that he had found them after all this time.

“I’ll write you letters. And I’ll be in contact with your mother to arrange some meeting during the summer. Maybe I can come to your home, and you can show me around to all your favourite places.” Remus and Sirius had come to the conclusion that spending all the shorter holidays around Europe, and in London, would be enough time for the girls to see what being Lady Black would entail, while Sirius' visiting their home in the Caribbean would contribute to their becoming a true family.

Remus was wise like that. He had always been the most intelligent of them.

Before Sirius could let go, the twin on the left – it was hard to tell them apart only seeing the top of their heads – tightened her grip. “Is Harry in trouble?”

Sirius held back a sigh. It had felt weird being an adult when that whole mishap had taken place. He remembered quite well all the times he and his friends had done something more irresponsible than leaving the wards around the house they were staying in.

“Yes, he is.” There was no way to say anything else, even as he felt more than ambivalent about the whole situation. “He knew quite well that there always is a risk for him. Because of who his adoptive father is, of who he is. And he knew about the rules set for his protection…” Sirius trailed off, Harry had been disappointingly well-behaved in his eyes, and only Remus’ intervention had kept Sirius from expressing that feeling. “But I’m sure the punishment won't be too bad.”

He felt how the two girls relaxed, suddenly realising that they had been worried about getting
Harry into trouble. Sirius felt proud of them, patted their shoulders before stepping back. “I hope you’ll write me too. I love reading what you’re up to. And good luck with your classes.”

“Thank you, Sirius.” “We’ll write,” Enora and Nawel said, smiling, turning and dashing back to the car where their mother was waiting.

After that everything was moving incredibly fast. The twins and their mother got into the car, they waved, and then the car was gone down the street, back on the way to Paris.

“You did great, Padfoot,” Moony said as he stepped up to Sirius, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder, squeezing. “I’m sure you’ll make a great father.”

Sirius heaved a sigh and looked back at his friend. “And why am I feeling as if my younger self would kick my ass if he could see this, Moony?”

“Because you’re being a responsible adult, Padfoot. I clearly remember that you never wanted to become one of those. You were determined to do everything to thwart your parents, break all the rules, disappoint them wherever you could,” Remus said, his head tilted to the side, just as a curious dog would do.

“Yeah,” Sirius sighed wistful, “that was always so satisfying. Getting her mad at me. And now? What would she say? Me, Lord Black? Restoring the family honour?” He was doing a lot of stuff he had vowed never to do.

“Don’t get maudlin on me, Padfoot. You do remember the tirades that horrible painting would spew once she was woken up?” A sharp finger dug into Sirius’ shoulder, jarring him out of his mood. “She tried to disown you! She's probably turning in her grave now that you, her disgrace of a son, have taken up the position of Lord Black. She probably would come back from Hell to scream at you if she knew that the two current possible heiresses have a muggle mother. You might be becoming an adult, Sirius, but be aware that not a thing you do at the moment would agree with the harridan that was your mother.”

Sirius nodded slowly. Remus was right, he might be an adult now – and behaving like one – but he was nothing like his late mother would want a Lord Black to be.

With a beaming grin, Sirius looked up into his friend’s eyes. “Thank you, Moony. I have no idea how I would cope without you.”

Remus laughed at that, patting Sirius on the head as he would do to pet a dog. “I don’t know either, Sirius. I don’t know either.”

Narrowing his eyes, Sirius realised that his friend just had called him unable to care for himself – how true it might be notwithstanding – and that this was a great opening to start a mock duel.

Sirius let his wand fall into his hand, out of its holster, taking careful aim at his friend's back, where he was walking back towards the cottage, away from the wind that was now picking up.

“Hey, Moony! Catch!” The moment Remus spun in reaction to that old phrase, Sirius cast a jelly-legs jinx at his friend, jumping out of the way of a spell headed his way, and the game was on.

Much later a relaxed Sirius returned to the cottage followed by Remus, intending to get his preparation for the April Wizengamot session at least started this day.

A good duel did lots for his mood. He needed to remember that.
In preparation for the next Wizengamot session, Marvolo had invited several members of that fine institution to Griffin House for tea. Under normal circumstances Marvolo got reminded why he had pondered going through with a violent revolution the very first time. These meetings were tedious and repetitive. Luckily for everyone, he had much more patience now that he was older than when he had started a political movement for the first time.

Otherwise violence would have been so much more tempting.

But today he had only invited allies to discuss strategy for the meeting and the little gatherings leading up to it where everyone would try to convince the others of their view on things.

That those gatherings tended to descend into gossiping about anything and everyone didn’t help matters now, nor did it help back then.

“Thank you,” Severus said, accepting a floating cup of tea before adding honey to it. Marvolo himself was currently stirring his tea to make sure the three spoons of sugar dissolved properly. The others were fixing their teas as well, all settling into the comfortable armchairs and love-seats. “I’m sorry to say that I’m expected back at the school in time for dinner.” Xerxes, Lucius, and Benjamin grinned at the Potions Master for that statement. They all knew very well that Severus didn’t exactly enjoy teaching Potions to the younger students, or all those who had to take the subject but had neither interest nor talent for the art.

“Duly noted, Severus. I agree that we need to wrap this meeting up before you’re expected back at Hogwarts and my son will return from school.” Marvolo took a sip from his tea, which had the perfect sweetness, before setting down the cup, casting a warming charm on it wandlessly because nothing was as bad as cold tea. “Maybe we’ll start with a quick update on your own projects?” It was phrased as a question but all of his guests understood the implied order.

As the one sitting next to him on the right side, Xerxes started. “The school is going well. I’m already planning to extend the possible trainee courses for Squib children at the start of the next year in September. A couple of muggle-born parents have visited the school over the spring holidays, and it looks like we’ll have to split a few classes next year, as more students are coming in.” Marvolo nodded, smiling. That was good news. “I regret to say, though, that there seems to be a kind of poltergeist forming. Some members of staff have seen something that they described much like Peeves, only much younger. I guess having that many untrained magicals in one place just has that effect.”

“My condolence,” Severus said, obviously thinking about all the trouble Peeves caused at the castle on a regular basis.

But Xerxes waved a hand, dismissing the issue. “It’s fine, really. One of the Unspeakables contacted me, as they’re interested to study the course of this development. Most magical schools are old and already have their poltergeist, this is the first time in living memory that they know of one forming.”

Marvolo moved to sit more forward in his chair. “That sounds like a worthy field of study. Please keep me updated.”
Severus was the next in line, shortly detailing the progress of his own research. Marvolo nodded politely, quite happy that the pregnancy created with the two-fathers potion – if they didn’t come up with a better name soon, this one probably would stick – was progressing well, that they had set up a broad base for the ancestry potion, or rather familial closeness potion, and that Severus still was making progress on a potion testing if two people would be able to have magical children together.

“My report is a little less encouraging.” Benjamin said with a grimace. “There is unrest among the ranks, my Lord. Many feel that this all takes too long, and some seem to think the direction we’re moving in is wrong. The murmurs I heard about are faint, and largely come from the young generation raised on stories of the last war. They’ll probably need close monitoring if we want to avoid other attacks like the abduction of the three young witches last year.”

“I see.” Marvolo felt that he should have anticipated such a development. Hadn’t he gathered just such young men around him? Those feeling as if they had something to lose when new members got the opportunity to move up in society? “We’ll need to know their motives. What makes them restless? What do they fear, and how can we use this to make them go along? Be careful about this, Benjamin. We already have one violent element out there. We don’t need to create more.”

Benjamin bowed his head in recognition of this order, probably already making plans on how to balance being a single father with a child at home and the delicate work needed to find possible threats before they became dangerous.

Lucius was sitting to Marvolo’s left and was therefore the last to speak. “The investigation into the Howler Attacks is moving forward. My niece,” Lucius didn’t quite manage to hide the hint of a sneer appearing on his face at the mention of the young Auror Tonks, “was at our home, as you know, my Lord, and I heard that the Weasley son working as a secretary to the Minister managed to freeze one of the howlers sent to the Minister. Currently the Unspeakables are still running tests. They didn’t find any fingerprints, and no one recognized the handwriting, but they hope the altered recipe might reveal the creator of them.” Marvolo hummed. Obviously whoever this was had learned from the errors of Madame Umbridge and knew of the new spell identifying who had touched an object based on fingerprints left behind. “But I feel that there might be an opening to move forward with one motion you had me draw up, my Lord.”

“Indeed? Which one?” There had been a lot of preliminary drafts for laws and amendments that Marvolo had given Lucius to write.

“Lifting of the ban on that one particular healing ritual that is useful for the treatment of strokes and heart attacks in older members of our society. I don’t remember its name. It was rather lengthy in the modern translation and a veritable-tongue breaking mess in the original version.” Lucius rarely was willing to risk looking like a fool because he couldn’t pronounce something properly. Back before Marvolo had lost his original body he had once caught the young man repeating a particular phrase in front of a mirror over and over. Looking back now it was rather funny, even as it had seemed mildly irritating back then.

“I remember the one. Why do you think we can move on this now?” The ritual had been banned from being taught because it was almost identical to one used to prolong one’s own life by sacrificing a newborn human. The sacrifice in the healing ritual was a handfull of leeches, and a few runes were different, but they were really close to one another in almost everything else. Not that the ritual using a baby was any good. The price the caster had to pay in addition wasn’t obvious at first glance, but it was severe and unpredictable. Reading up on them had filled a young Marvolo with a morbid fascination like that others seemed to get out of telling each other horror stories.
“Old Ogden had a stroke earlier this month. It was all over the news, and the talk for weeks at the Ministry. He didn’t die, but the rest of his life won’t be much fun. And there is only one Healer left in all of Britain – no longer young himself – who is licensed to use the ritual. He was doing the ritual on the continent at the time. With the sympathy for the family and the dismay over this unhappy coincidence still fresh in the public’s mind… many on the Wizengamot have not led the healthiest of lives and are now getting old. With the proper arguments, we’ll probably be able to get the votes we need.”

Banning the anger over having missed that important bit of news to the deep recesses of his mind, Marvolo started to moderate an impromptu planning session on how to get a majority for that vote. Attending as many tea-gatherings as possible, talking with people there about poor old Ogden and how that ritual could have helped him have more happy years to come – sadly – was a main feature of the plan they came up with.

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The first students already had walked past where Ginny was standing in an alcove, heading for the Great Hall. The train had arrived at Hogsmeade a while ago, and the first carriages had arrived not long after. But Ginny was looking out for a special group of students, or rather one special student.

She scanned the thickening crowd, ignoring – as much as was possible – her brother and Hermione standing near by, waiting as well. They were bickering again. The two of them had been constantly bickering since the start of the holidays.

It had been terrible!

A few times their bickering had affected the mood in the whole common room. That the twins had used the additional free time to promote more of their merchandise hadn’t helped one bit, as Hermione hadn’t been happy with them for that. The fifth year prefect really had a thing about following the rules.

Hermione had thrown the twins out of the common room one evening, to the dismay of all those students who had hoped to buy a few more of the skiving snackboxes.

Hermione was the first to spot the person she was looking for. “Harry!” she called out the moment the unruly black hair came into view. Despite the fact that Ginny felt she had managed to get past her crush – against the resistance of her dorm mates, who still thought she should be with Harry – she still thought that the unruly strands of hair gave him a rakish look. Harry said something to the others who had come in with him – mostly Slytherins from his year – then he quickly made his way over to Hermione and Ron, giving them both quick hugs, before Hermione could start grilling him on the state of his homework.

“Leave him be, Mione! You’ll kill us all with your constant need to study! Please leave us out!” Ron complained, not for the first time. Ginny rolled her eyes. Hopefully Ron would realise soon that his behaviour was only fanning the flames under the need to study, Hermione constantly displayed.

“Don’t fret, Hermione. I did do some revising, and have all my essays finished,” Harry answered, sounding quite happy.
Not really paying the two Gryffindors and the newest Slytherin any more mind, Ginny hurried over to where she had spotted a much more orderly mop of black hair on top of another Slytherin’s head.

“Theo!” She had more tact than to yell his name through the whole entrance hall, but the sound of her own voice – why did she have to sound so excited? – made her blush.

“Ginny! I missed you.” Theo answered, and their hands found each other almost without conscious thought. Theo was so much more attentive than Harry had ever been. She wished they would kiss, but so far Theo had been the perfect gentleman, moving their relationship forward slowly.

Michael had been much more forward in almost everything. But in comparison, Ginny liked Theo’s careful pace a lot more. In the end, though, Ginny felt it was time to move their relationship forward from where it was now.

Dragging Theo behind her, a cheeky grin on her face, Ginny moved them back to the alcove she had been standing in earlier. Theo followed without resistance, looking a little bemused but happy.

“May I say hello properly?” Ginny asked once they were out of the way and reasonably sheltered from the eyes of all the others.

Theo was quick to catch up, and already leaning closer to her, when he answered. “I would very much like that.”

They exchanged a not quite chaste kiss – Ginny had snogged often with Michael before breaking up, so she really had a scale to measure against concerning the chasteness of kisses – before separating again.

“Thanks for the lovely welcome, Ginny,” Theo repeated, giving her hands a squeeze. It was nice that he respected her wish not to be called Ginevra, which reminded her too much of her mother’s scolding her to be comfortable.

“I’m really glad you’re back.” Time at school was precious, because she didn’t know how her parents would react should she bring home a boyfriend at her age – she knew well enough how some of her brothers would react – and had doubts that her mother would be happy with her dating the son of a man she and many others considered a Death Eater on top of that.

“Let’s meet up during lunch break tomorrow,” Theo suggested more than asked, and Ginny nodded happily in answer.

It was a little unfortunate that they both had doubts about the likely reaction from their respective families to their budding relationship, as that made it necessary to keep their time together mostly out of the school’s eyes. All wizards and witches were too big gossips for them to hope their spending time together wouldn’t make it back to their parents if anyone noticed.

“See you then.” Ginny smiled, slipping out of the alcove and into the stream of students on their way to the evening meal.

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“You’ve really finished all your homework?” Ron asked, clearly not being able to process this thought.
Harry laughed, feeling light as a feather. “I have really finished all of my homework, Ron. And did more revision than you'll think healthy, even if I’m sure I didn’t manage to match your expectations, Hermione.” Walking side by side with his two oldest friends towards the Great Hall, amongst all the other students, felt really good.

Returning to the castle after a happy holiday – even with being grounded for the end of it, it had been happy – was different than how it was after a summer holiday at the Dursleys’. The happiness of being with his friends again wasn’t swallowed by the relief of almost a year without his hateful aunt and uncle.

“The OWLs are important! They determine which subjects we can take next year, what career choices we’ll have! You really should have studied more!” Hermione had managed to let go of quite a lot of her bossy attitude since first year, but Harry noticed fondly that she really still had a massive streak of her studying-is-the-most-important-ever mentality behind her tempered behaviour.

“You don’t even know how much revision I have done, Hermione!” Harry laughed, opening his cloak that he had closed on the way to the carriages to fend off the wind. “You can’t just claim that I didn’t do enough.” He laughed again and gave a wink as a flustered Hermione blushed a little, shoving him half heartedly in retaliation.

“You can’t claim to have not studied to my standard and expect me not to react to that.” Hermione mock pouted, causing Harry to grin. “We’ll see how well you did in our next study session!” She exerted some effort to make it sound like a threat, but her eyes gave her away.

Harry waved, and nodded, already searching the Slytherin table to see if the others had already sat down. “I’ll remember that. We’ll see each other tomorrow? I don’t think there’s time to meet after the meal today.”

“That’s fine. I know for a fact that Ron has more than one homework assignment to finish still.”

Leaving behind a protesting Ron – who claimed there wasn’t that much left – and a scolding Hermione, Harry made his way over to the Slytherin table, making a detour to greet Luna, a happy spring in his step.

If someone would have told him how happy he would be by the time exams were already there the past summer, he would have thought that person was mad. How much could change in such a short time.

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**Monday, 15th of April 1996**

The previous evening the fifth-year Slytherins had found a schedule with their appointments for career advice on the notice board in the common room. Harry had groaned even before he had spotted his own time. He really wasn’t sure anymore what he wanted to do once he was out of school. Then he had seen that he was to be in Snape’s office right before dinner and he had let himself fall into the next open seat, burying his head in his hands.
Hermione had been nagging them all to take a look at the pamphlets that had appeared in all the common rooms approximately a week before the holidays, but Harry had had his mind on other things.

Now standing before the office door of his Head of House, Harry wished he had listened to his friend. He knocked on the door and opened it at the call of “Enter!” from within.

“Sir,” Harry greeted and walked over to the chair sitting in front of the desk, right across from the stern Professor, who looked tired after a day of teaching, a small stack of scrolls indicating that he had been marking homework prior to this meeting.

“Mr. Slytherin. The school’s board is of the opinion that this meeting should help you determine which subjects to choose in your last two years of schooling with the aim of attaining a NEWT in them.” Harry knew instantly that Snape didn’t agree with that goal, or maybe the method, but whatever it was, his Professor really wasn’t happy with this way of going about career advice. “Have you made use of the information provided and narrowed down the possibilities?”

Harry nodded slowly. How easy it had been to say he wanted to become an Auror once he had learned that his father had been one, and with Ron being all enthusiastic about that idea. Idly wondering if he now should be considering becoming a Dark Lord, Harry carefully made his way through the maze of his indecisiveness. “Prior to this past summer I was convinced I would like nothing more than to become an auror. But now that I know how much I still need to learn for my position as the last of the House of Potter… I’m not really sure I can do that and train to become an Auror. There’s more training required, right?” This would have been so much easier with Professor McGonagall as his Head of House, Harry was sure of that.

“You’re correct, Mr. Slytherin. A number of different training courses over a timespan of three years is required of all prospective Aurors. Before that starts, there is a number of different character and aptitude tests to complete,” Snape explained, more patiently than Harry had expected him to be. “But you’re entertaining other options?”

Harry nodded slowly. He wasn’t at all sure if the Professor would even be able to help him in this. “I didn’t see any information about it, but I know that there has to be someone creating all the art I see. And illustrations in books and so on. I think I would like to go in that direction.” Somehow Harry felt self-conscious about his wish to become an artist. Luna constantly made him feel good about his art and his ambition to learn to create animated art, even realistically acting portraits. Even if the last probably involved more than the charms he had practiced on some drawings of his. The different loops of blooming herbs had been a hit with the others. But he still feared others might react like Vernon Dursley would. He’d repeatedly called painting and art in general something girly in a derisive voice.

As Professor Snape stayed silent for longer than Harry felt was normal – he had half expected to be ridiculed for this – he looked up to see a rare sight.

A speechless Professor Snape.

“Professor?” This situation was strange beyond what Harry wanted to deal with. The older wizard took a deep breath, pinched the bridge of his nose and moved to sit up more straight in his chair. “I’m sorry, Mr. Slytherin, you are indeed correct in your guess that there is not much information I can offer you for this career path. I can offer to search for more information though.”

Now it was Harry who was left speechless for a moment, before he was able to recover from the
shock of a truly helpful Professor Snape. The man had been much better this year, but offering to go out of his way to help Harry with something so out of the ordinary?

Taking a deep breath and blinking a few times, Harry forced himself to nod. “That would be awesome, sir. I don’t even know where to start looking for information.”

“I would suggest that you ask your father for information. I have seen more than once that he’s informed about many branches of magic that we others know very little about.” The Professor rifled through a stack of parchment in a kind of binder, getting out a single sheet of parchment. “As we don’t know what beside a talent for art, and probably some experience with different styles,” the Professor shrugged, clearly out of his area of expertise, “I can’t really tell you what subjects would be helpful in this endeavour. I suspect Potions might come in handy for the creation of paints and the like. As I only accept the best students past OWLs who managed to get an Outstanding, you’ll still have to improve your work. Especially your precision in measurement needs work.” Harry nodded that he understood while Professor Snape took a longer look at what Harry assumed was a report on his work so far this year by his other professors.

“You’re doing quite well, it would seem. Even in Ancient Runes you are on an acceptable level. Keep up your work and you’ll be able to sit your OWL in this subject next year.” Placing the sheet of parchment down on the desk, the Professor looked up and directly at Harry, his dark hair falling around his face. Had he cut his hair? “Please ask your father for advice where you might find information on how to pursue a career in art. I’ll make inquiries of my own. I would propose another meeting in a week’s time, if that is agreeable with you?”

Harry nodded, feeling dazed. “I think I should have an answer from father by then, sir. Thank you for your time.”

And in almost no time at all Harry was out of the office with all the jars filled with disgusting things lining the walls. That had gone much smoother than he had expected, even if he really wasn’t all that much better informed, nor did he feel more sure about his plan for after school. But maybe it wasn’t as urgent as Hermione wanted them all to believe anyway. He had a lot to learn about the politics of the Wizengamot, estate management, and other stuff like that. If he didn’t know what career to choose, he could spend some time on catching up on all that he had missed out on because he had been placed with his muggle relatives.

Feeling better about the whole business, Harry made his way up to the Great Hall. Maybe Luna would be early, and he could tell her about that strange experience of a career advice meeting.

Chapter End Notes

That scene between Theo and Ginny hadn’t been planned to be that long. Well, who am I to complain about them having a mind of their own? Does anyone have any ideas for a name for the two-fathers-potion? I have been trying to come up with a name for so long now, I’m happy over every idea you might have!

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Closing In

Chapter Notes

This one is a little bit shorter but I feel it’s a good place to make a cut (and I had two busy weeks). Enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tuesday, 16th of April 1996

Waiting in the floo reception room, Lucius pondered his Lord’s request. It was kind of surprising that his Lord’s heir wanted to go into art after school. Taking all the rumours about the boy into account, the blond wizard had assumed that he would go into Quidditch or maybe into something with more action, like law enforcement.

Then the floo flared green and a wizard in eccentric robes stepped out, waving his wand with a flourish to get rid of any soot that might have stuck to him.

“Bartolomeo, welcome!” Lucius greeted the man, extending his arms at about hip height, moving forward in anticipation of the usual greeting.

“That you did, my friend,” Lucius agreed easily, moving to guide his guest to one of the parlours with the best light this time of day. “But I was convinced that my family would not grow beyond the size it had been back then. But I was wrong.” And how happy he was that he had been wrong. Narcissa was so happy with her, their, daughter that he wasn’t against another child should Narcissa wish to try again.

“And now if I would say it again, what would you say?” Bartolomeo wanted to know, mischief sparkling in his eyes.

Lucius laughed, earning himself a disdainful look from one of the portraits they were walking by. “Then I would say that you might be right, but that I will take the chance. At least that way there would be a portrait of my family after each addition to our number.” He certainly had enough money to indulge in getting them painted numerous times.

“How am I to decline your money, or painting such a lovely subject?” Bartolomeo said in easy acceptance.

They settled in the comfortable armchairs near one of the floor-to-ceiling windows, filling the appearing cups from the teapot provided by the manor’s elves. Then they started arranging for Bartolomeo’s coming over to reside in the manor over the summer to paint a family portrait of the now larger Malfoy family, just as he had done when Draco had been a few months old.
Once business was taken care of, a plate of small pastries joined the tea, and Lucius brought up what he had been asked by his Lord to find out. “Bartolomeo, if someone wants to become an artist, what would one need to do?”

“Your son has expressed a wish to go into art?” the artist asked, surprised, as Draco never had expressed any interest in art. At all.

“No,” Lucius answered, shaking his head. Draco was pretty set on potions as his career. “I’m asking for a close associate. He knows that I was going to speak with you and asked me to inquire for his son.” Only Bartolomeo's rolling his eyes, making a continue gesture with his hands, clued Lucius in to the fact that he had been more evasive than he should be. “Lord Slytherin asked me to ask you. His son and heir is interested in pursuing a career in art.”

“Does he have talent and dedication?” Bartolomeo asked, probably to gauge if there even was a point in answering the question.

“I have seen an oil painting of his, and have heard my son speak of drawings in coal made by Heir Slytherin-Potter. I think he isn’t a hopeless case. But as I’m by no means an expert to estimate how far someone might come with the right training, all I can say is that he seems dedicated to learn.” Maybe that had been a bit more like diplomatic avoidance than a proper answer, but Lucius truly felt unable to judge if Henry Slytherin-Potter had the dedication and talent needed to succeed in art.

“He should put together a portfolio with examples of his art, and then write to different current Masters not already having an apprentice. If you want me to, I could probably gather up a few names. He’ll need to convince one of our number that he has the skill, dedication, and determination to be worthy of the work it takes to educate a young mind in our intricate art.” Bartolomeo suddenly was much more serious, a marked change to his normally easy going demeanour.

“He’ll have to choose his NEWT subjects soon. Any advice on what he should concentrate on?” Lucius fished for more information, already pretty sure that he wouldn’t get any straight answers out of the other wizard.

Bartolomeo gave a knowing smile. “Potions is always a good choice, but other than that, he should work on other things. Most magical schools have a surprising lack of useful teachings for the art of magical paintings.”

Even after the artist had long left, Lucius was wondering what exactly was required in magical painting that wasn’t taught at Hogwarts or anywhere else.

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Wednesday, 17th of April 1996

It was almost disappointing how quickly everyone fell back into the routine of homework and classes after the holiday. The workload didn’t decrease even a tiny little bit, and Harry felt like he was fighting an uphill battle with all his work right after the second day had been over.
On this morning only the thought of the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend – Luna had agreed to go with him to one of the curiosity shops – and the Quidditch practice to be held the next day let him walk into the Great Hall for breakfast without the urge to whine as some of the others had done. Some of his fellow Slytherins were decidedly not morning people.

Sitting down at his usual spot, Theo, Draco, and the others settling in around him, Harry looked over the choices and started to pick what he wanted for breakfast today. Maybe he would try some of the coffee steaming in a big pot over where the seventh years were sitting bleary-eyed. Some of them had been vocal about its advantages during a time when finding time to do work was not easy.

“Pass the milk please?” Harry asked over to where the jug was standing between Vincent and Gregory. With a grunt – those two definitely belonged to those not waking up before well into breakfast – the jug was passed over, and Harry accepted it to fill his goblet.

“How long is your Defence essay, Harry?” Theo wanted to know, getting himself another helping of baked beans.

“Long enough,” Harry answered, quickly checking that he had packed the scroll when he had packed his book bag that morning. “I had enough time, being grounded and all. And there were many stories I could include of how going to anyone with authority isn’t really the answer. You need to find the right person for the actual situation. And I went into detail!” Theo laughed at that, but nodded. It was a simple fact that Professor Slinkhard had a thing for rules, non-violent solutions, and reliance on authority over acting yourself. Harry had made an effort in each essay to find a situation in which the preferred solution Professor Slinkhard wanted them to write about wasn’t the best one. As they all were written in addition to the desired answers, Harry had gotten good grades in all his homework assignments after discovering that strategy.

As Harry contemplated if he should add an apple to his breakfast, the morning post arrived, with hundreds of owls filling the air with their screeches, the sound of packages and parchment scrolls landing on tables, and hundreds of wings brushing against each other.

Just like all other mornings, one of the delivery owls from the Daily Prophet carefully touched down in front of Harry, bringing the newest edition of the newspaper.

Even before Harry had accepted the wrapped newspaper, the murmurs all over the Hall – there were quite a few students getting the paper – clued him in that there was something noteworthy in this morning’s news.

Once he saw the headline, there was no doubt that was the reason for the murmurs.

“Karkaroff is dead?” “How long?” “I hadn’t even heard that he was missing!” While sitting there on his bench trying to wrap his head around what he was seeing on the front page, Harry heard snippets from all the others discussing what they had half-read.

Harry reminded himself that he had known, if not in detail, that Karkaroff, who had given up so many Death Eaters to get out of punishment himself, and therefore had been a traitor, had been caught and punished. Marvolo had even warned Harry that the body would probably be found sometime in spring.

Taking a deep breath, Harry made himself read the article so he would know what had been found. It seemed as if the body of Igor Karkaroff, ex-Death Eater and Headmaster of Durmstrang, had been found at the foot of a cliff in Scandinavia by muggle police a few weeks back, when the snow had started to melt. He didn’t have any identifying papers on him, which explained why it had
taken so long for the magical community to catch on that the body had been found. Locals remembered when asked that he had been there at the end of the previous summer and had left an inn, just as a storm had formed. Currently the authorities were assuming that he had met with an accident in that storm.

“Harry?” He was nudged from the side, and when he turned he saw the concerned face of Theo, who had a paper folded next to his plate. “Are you feeling well?” Harry was pretty sure his surprise was clear as day on his face, as Theo didn’t wait for an answer, but clarified his concern. “You’re awfully pale.”

Harry took a deep, steadying breath. “No. I’m fine. It’s not everyday you learn that someone you have known, if only briefly and not really well, has died in an accident.” He thought it would be a reasonable enough excuse for why this information had shocked him so. Because even if only in his own head, he had to admit that it was disconcerting to be reminded of the violent side of his adoptive father.

“When... ?” Theo started a question only to cut himself off. “Oh yes, he was here last year, wasn’t he? Did you get to interact with him that often?”

To that question Harry just had to give Theo a look. It seemed that his peers here at the school that had parents, or other relatives, in the Death Eaters weren’t kept as in the loop as Harry was by Marvolo. Others might see it as a blessing not to know such things, not to know enough to imagine the torture Karkaroff had been put through. But in the end, Harry was sure he was better off knowing the truth.

“No, I didn’t get to talk to him often. But still. It’s different reading that someone died who you knew. And maybe if he had learned of how father was no longer affected by that curse, he would have returned and could have avoided falling down that cliff.” Harry pointed to the picture of a high cliff and different plants swaying in the wind, that had been printed next to the article.

“I guess you’re right,” Theo slowly answered. “Why do you think he was running?”

Giving Theo another look, Harry folded the paper and picked his utensils back up. “Why else should he have been there? At a muggle inn? Leaving shelter and heading out into a brewing storm? I think that him running is the most reasonable explanation.”

All around them students got up from the benches, talking and speculating about the article. Harry quickly picked up an apple – easy to eat on the way – and stood as well. He certainly would have to think on this a lot more, maybe speak with Mrs. Goyle about it, but for the moment they needed to go or risk being late to class. “You coming, Theo?”

Not answering with words, Theo stood as well – as did most of their year-mates – and followed Harry out of the Great Hall, heading for their classes together with all the other students leaving.

ooOoo

Rubbing his eyes, Marvolo folded the last of the reports so it would fit into the drawer of the cabinet he kept most of his Death-Eater-related correspondence in. “Henbane!” he called the elf who had been stationed here all this time, keeping Igor alive, the house clean, and Marvolo supplied with tea and small cakes whenever he needed to work here for extended periods of time.
“Master calls?” The elf was wearing Slytherin green, as always, and a resigned expression for a reason Marvolo wasn’t sure of.

“Tea please, Henbane. And some biscuits if there are any left.” He needed to finish the reports before he returned home to Marcus, who had been difficult since Harry had returned to Hogwarts, and without a good strong cup of tea he wasn’t sure he would make it in time.

With a bow the elf vanished again, presumably to prepare the items he was asked for.

In the meantime Marvolo picked up another letter from one of his Death Eaters, opening it with a flick of a finger before getting out the letter itself.

Halfway through the letter, a tray with a pot of tea, sugar bowl, fine china cup, and a small plate of mixed biscuits appeared on a corner of the desk Marvolo was working at.

The content of the letter wasn’t exactly unexpected – a young adult had expressed their interest in receiving the Dark Mark and the parents had written on their behalf – but tedious. Marvolo had thought more than once about if and how he should accept new followers into his service. It wasn’t as if he exactly needed them in the same way he had when violence was the main tool for the changes he wanted to achieve.

Looking up with a sigh, Marvolo reached for the tea and had to suppress a flinch when he spotted Henbane standing there at attention, obviously waiting.

“Henbane, is there a problem?” An elf waiting around where it could be seen wasn’t something Marvolo was accustomed to.

“Henbane is sorry, Lord Master sir,” the elf answered, visibly holding himself back from wringing his hands. “But here’s isn’t enough to do for Henbane, Lord Master sir. Now nasty traitor wizard gone, Henbane hoped Lord Master sir would have more to do?”

Marvolo blinked slowly.

Not enough to do?

Considering the nature of house-elves and the fact that Igor had been gone for a while now, removing a big part of Henbane’s work, not having enough work might actually be a problem. In fact, looking back, the house had seemed unusually spotless since Igor had been removed. Damage done during a duelling session vanishing before they had even finished… He guessed it was kind of his responsibility to find work for his elf.

“Isn’t there enough work over at Griffin House, though?” Marvolo asked before he had truly thought that through.

The scowl on the elf’s face was deep enough to rival one of Severus’, startling Marvolo in its intensity. “Flimm does not want Henbane helping at Griffin House! Claims being Head Elf. Says that Henbane isn’t to ask questions, can’t take care of family. Henbane tried to argue that Lord Master’s elf is Henbane. But Flimm is the Potter elf, and the family lives at a Potter House.” Henbane let his head fall forward, looking totally dejected.

Marvolo, in the meantime, was sitting behind his desk, once again rearranging his picture of reality. He knew that his Death Eaters had in the past – and still did now – maneuvered for positions of favour and influence. Even the general public was trying to curry favour with him, an influential wizard with a seat on the Wizengamot.
The fact that elves were doing the same, in a way, was a shock. But it shouldn’t have been one. He had seen what Kreacher had been capable of for his beloved master Regulus, had heard how Winky had tried to help Barty, or how that insane elf Dobby had defied Lucius to warn Harry.

House-elves obviously were as complex as humans. So this would need careful handling.

“Thank you for letting me know, Henbane.” He needed to make sure his elf knew that he was welcome to ask for help. “I fear I was remiss in defining clear boundaries for your various duties. I’ll aim to do better in the future. But for the moment. Flimm!”

With a popping sound the Potter elf appeared in the room – wearing a white tea towel with the Potter Crest on it – bowing deeply. “Master Marvolo calls?”

“Yes.” Marvolo stood, folding his hands behind his back. He felt a little as if he was about to scold a few first-years as he had done when he had been made prefect. He’d better keep his temper in check.

“I was made aware that the duties and responsibilities between you haven’t been made clear by me. Listen up.” Both elves straightened, resembling a pair of Aurors in stance and attitude, but looking kind of ridiculous despite the sense of honour and seriousness they exuded.

“Griffin House and its upkeep will remain Flimm’s main concern, this house and its upkeep are Henbane’s responsibility.” Both elves stood taller – or as tall as they possibly could – at that proclamation. “Furthermore, Henbane is my personal elf. He will care for whatever room I’m residing in, deliver snacks and drinks during the day, care for my clothes and my other possessions, as well as my mail.” Henbane seemed rather pleased with that proclamation, while Flimm made a face as if someone had forced him to chew on a lemon.

“The care of both my sons will fall to Flimm. The both of you shall work together whenever a task demands it. And if there is further dispute over a task or responsibility, you’re both hereby ordered to bring such before me to decide.” Marvolo looked between the two elves and arched a brow, before asking. “Any questions left?”

“No, Master Marvolo.”

“No, Lord Master,” the elves answered with a bow each, popping away without waiting for a clear dismissal. But as Marvolo wanted them gone for the moment anyway, that was fine with him.

Finally sitting down in his chair again and pouring the tea – thankfully there was a warming charm on that teapot – Marvolo set to finishing his correspondence before going home.

ooOoo

It had been a long day.

Not only had the demands from the lessons Harry had had today taken their toll, but also the pondering he had been doing the whole day over Igor Karkaroff’s death.

He had come up with a lot of different reasons why the path chosen by Marvolo had been the best path possible. That only with a firm example of what happened to traitors the other more violent followers were kept under control. That it had been his own fault for running, whereas Snape –
who had worked as a spy – had tried to redeem himself and survived.

But all the time spent with Madame Goyle finding ways to process all that had happened in his own life, finding ways to be happy, had made him too aware of the tendency to rationalise what had happened.

So he had searched for good things coming from Marvolo Slytherin's being free, and the Death Eaters bent to a new purpose.

And he had found some.

For one, a large number of children were away from unfriendly homes, or even the streets. And Harry included himself in that. Then there was a new school and the change in status for Squibs just because the magical community had finally learned that so-called muggle-born witches and wizards were born from lost Squib lines. Even the fact that Daphne was considering a muggle-born wizard for a partner – although as Hermione probably would not be happy to learn the blonde’s reasons – likely was a result of Marvolo's being free.

With a deep sigh Harry let himself fall into the prominent wingback chair right in front of the big fireplace in the common room, his bag settling down right next to the chair.

As usual a few of the older students gave him a short glare, and his friends settled around him, getting out their work. Since Harry had managed a decent defence against that mob of older students, not one of them had tried anything again.

“What a day!” Theo said with feeling, stretching his back with his arms high over his head before letting himself fall against the backrest. “Somehow it only ever gets harder.”

Pansy snorted, not looking up from her drawing for Herbology she had gotten out the moment she had taken her seat. “What did you expect?” She carefully removed a line with her wand. “It’s almost time for the OWLs. Obviously there’ll be more work.”

While his friends descended into bickering over the amount of work expected from them all, Harry reached into his robe pocket, getting out the vibrating mirror he kept there.

“Father! Marcus! Nagini!” he greeted the moment the three heads became visible in the mirror, replacing the reflective surface. He had to grin as Marcus was closely cuddled to their father, and Nagini had somehow looped herself around the two humans, placing her head on top of Marvolo’s.

“Hello, Harry.” Marcus almost screamed, beaming like a loon, waving his hand really close to the mirror, almost knocking it out of Marvolo’s hand.

“Careful, Marcus! And hello, Harry.” Marvolo looked almost as tired as Harry felt.

“Give me a moment and I’ll go over to my room,” Harry said, standing and leaving his books – Astronomy and Care of Magical Creatures – and his bag in the care of his friends.

“How was your day, Marcus?” Harry asked to fill the way to his room with something other than silence.

“It was a great day! We were in the garden, planting some plants. We almost managed a neat row! And we mixed in some dung with the dirt.” Marcus really was excited about his day, and Harry could easily see that this wasn’t the first time Marvolo got to hear a report of the day spent planning the beds their class would care for, and later planting them.
Harry concentrated on the mirror in his hand on the way to his room, but he could see the reactions from all around as he walked past the other Slytherins. Most seemed used to the nightly routine of mirror calls between the Slytherin family members, a few chuckled, most fell silent as he walked by.

Marcus was already in bed, and once Harry had settled on his own, Marvolo started to read them one of Marcus' favourite stories. It was a little strange in Harry’s eyes to be read a story over a communication mirror, but it was kind of nice at the same time.

It took a while, but finally the story was told, Marcus was tucked in, and Marvolo carried the mirror out of Marcus’ bedroom and over to his own room.

“You look as if you need a good night’s sleep, Father.” Harry stated matter-of-factly. “Had a hard day?”

Marvolo nodded, rubbing his eyes with his free hand. “It was. Too many letters to read, and then all those people wanting my opinion on Igor’s death. I wouldn’t be surprised if there is an article tomorrow quoting me.”

“And what did you say?” Harry asked, curious, and thinking that he would need to work on his own ability to evade questions and lie without giving himself away if he wanted to be a successful politician. Not that he planned to use those skills, but having them wouldn’t hurt.

“That I truly regret how Igor Karkaroff died through what looks like an accident, and that I don’t exactly know how I could have had any influence on this. The reporter repeated the question more than once.” His father’s face was straight, nothing betraying the fact that he had had a lot to do with the death of Igor Karkaroff.

Harry rolled his eyes, but refrained from commenting.

Marvolo obviously understood and hissed :It’s over and done with:. without making any promises that something like this wouldn’t happen again.

And Harry let it rest. There was not much that could be done about those that had promised themselves to Lord Slytherin back in the day. And the magic of the bond kind of made Marvolo the one responsible for disciplining those sworn to him. Igor Karkaroff had been a traitor, Marvolo had picked the punishment. Harry wasn’t happy with it, but there was not much to interpret differently about the oath taken and the magic involved. The magic Marvolo had used as a base had been among the many things Harry still had to study.

“Did you find any information on how one would go about becoming an artist?” Harry changed the subject, not willing to linger any longer on troubling topics.

Marvolo went along with the change agreeably. “I have asked Lucius for contacts. He mentioned just recently his wish to commission another family portrait and his search for an artist. He should write you soon with information on how to reach various artists. As far as I remember, there are no schools or programs teaching art. Finding a Master to learn under is pretty much the only way to get to learn magical art.” Marvolo sat back further on his own bed – as Harry could see by the background – and smiled. “I also checked muggle education in that direction. There are summer courses in different art techniques you could take. As the basics are pretty much the same, you might consider working on your skills with the help of a teacher,” Marvolo suggested.

Harry nodded slowly. Getting to learn from an actual teacher might be interesting. “It’s possible to study art at university, isn’t it?”
“Yes. But you would need proof that you finished muggle school,” Marvolo brought up a difficulty Harry himself had not considered so far.

He made a face, making Marvolo laugh. “I’m pretty sure that I don’t want to go to school any longer once I have my NEWTs.” Taking summer courses on art was one thing. Going to school for the entirety of secondary education was not something Harry was willing to contemplate.

“I’ll keep you updated, Harry,” Marvolo chuckled. “Your friends probably will be waiting. It looked like we interrupted a study session?”

“We were just about to start.” Harry nodded in agreement, already thinking of the chapters he wanted to read again, the essays he had to write.

“Off you go, Harry. And don’t forget to get enough rest!”

Smiling at his father, Harry nodded. “The same applies to you. Take some Dreamless Sleep and get a good night’s rest.”

They finished their call on a laugh and Harry slipped the mirror back into his pocket after deactivating it. Time to return to the others and get some studying in.

ooOOoo

Thursday, 18th of April 1996

Furiously writing another of the blood-red letters, he pushed his anger down through the quill onto the parchment. All his attacks had met with a frustrating lack of success. Not even one person had been seriously injured. And not one person had changed their mind. Just today he had heard rumours that the Egyptian Ministry had offered support in the investigation against the Howler Terrorist.

They were calling him a terrorist now!

Why were they all so blind? Had no one learned anything?

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named could not be trusted!

That dark wizard was too good a manipulator to ever not have something sinister in mind.

This Saturday was another opportunity to make the public notice the danger. Reaching many at the same time would hopefully help. And it might be one of his last chances, as that blasted Auror Tonks was closing in on him.

If he managed to incapacitate that one wizard at the right time, the Wizengamot might be an opportunity to strike swiftly and in person.

He hadn’t actually wanted to get involved that directly, acting in the open, as he felt that he wasn’t up to the task of taking out the threat. If just anyone could have rid them of He-Who-Most-Not-Be-Named, then it would have happened long before the night the Potters had died, their only son surviving in what had seemed like a miracle back then.
But now he felt as if they all should have known that there was no such thing as a miracle. The boy probably had been tainted even then and putting him down would have been the wiser choice.

Finishing up that one howler, he grabbed another prepared parchment, dipped his quill, and started writing once more. Maybe he should charm some quills to copy his movements. He would be able to produce that many more howlers that much quicker that way.

His wife had declined helping him, mostly sitting in apathy near the fireplace, stroking a picture of their lost son.

With that thought his grief tried to overcome him once more, and he turned to his anger not to fall prey to the apathy as his wife had.

Howler after howler was finished, folded, and addressed, waiting for the moment they would come close to the one they were addressed to, to activate. Getting all those owls to deliver them would be a chore, had been a problem from the beginning, but he had enough experience by now, and being discovered to be influencing illegal numbers of normal birds was no longer of great consequence. It would end soon. One way or another.

oooOOooo

Friday, 19th of April 1996

It had been a long day teaching, and only the fact that his duties as Potions Professor at Hogwarts had got him out of tea-party duty had made this day somewhat bearable. But following the small update on how their effort was progressing, Severus had received the order to find a good name for the two-fathers-potion, as the Dark Lord was not happy with the current name.

And so Severus found himself sitting at the low table in their sitting room – on the floor no less – surrounded by different books, opened to seemingly random pages, lots of parchment sheets, filled with words, word combinations, ideas, and references.

Latin and Greek – the old version, not the currently spoken one – were two of the obvious choices, and so he had started with them. That parchment currently was behind him on the floor, littered with different combinations of pater and duo. When Severus had added the Italian version, he had decided it was time to investigate other options, placing that parchment aside to go back to later.

Currently he was experimenting with different English variations on the same parchment he had noted down the possibility to name the potion after the three individuals who had been the first trio to test it. As he had to ask them for their opinion – and permission – to do so, that idea was set aside for the moment as well.

Groaning in frustration, pinching the bridge of his nose, Severus sat up straighter, moving from side to side to get the kinks out of his back.

“What are you doing on the floor, love?” Sonja asked as she walked in, carrying a tea-tray. “I wasn’t in the bathtub all that long, was I?”

The tea-tray was deposited on a small side table, displacing a book that Sonja picked up after it had
fallen to the floor, then she made to sit down. While his wife settled herself in her wingback chair – transfigured to her specifications out of one she had deemed the opposite of comfy – Severus looked over the mess he had made of their living space, sighing.

“I’m trying to come up with an acceptable name for the two-fathers-potion that sounds a little…” Severus trailed off, not even sure what exactly he was searching for. “I guess official. The Dark Lord worries that the current working title will stick if we don’t come up with a final name soon.”

Sonja closed the book she had picked up to look at the title written on the spine. “And you need a book on Greek mythology for this, because?”

“Because I wanted to check on a few stories I only half-remembered. Athena, who was born from Zeus’ head, for instance. And I wanted to check on a story about Anteros. I think he was named as the son of Poseidon and Nerites. But I also found versions that Anteros is the son of Aphrodite, or Ares and one of his many female lovers. I think the last one is a later addition, as his Roman name Mars is used in the story I found. I came to the conclusion that this name might be too confusing.” He shrugged, once again pinching the bridge of his nose. Anteros Potion would sound good if not for the potential for confusion he had found in the different versions of the Greek myths. Maybe he simply should put together a list of possible names and send it to his Lord. Should he decide and free Severus of the responsibility.

At the subtle sounds of knitting – the needles moving against each other simply gave a distinct pattern of clicking noises – Severus looked up to watch Sonja knit some baby clothes. She said that she liked the motions and producing something with her own hands, and Severus loved the picture she made sitting there, a look of concentration on her face, diligently and slowly working on a tiny sweater or cap. He had trouble identifying either in the early stages of a piece.

“Have you more ideas for poetic names, or are you going for a more bland one?” Sonja asked after a few moments of silence – just her knitting and the fire making sounds – without looking up from her work.

“Most ideas are variations on two fathers. Latin, English. It’s simply the easiest descriptive naming. You know as well as I that the commonly used name will differ from the original anyway.”

Sonja hummed. It was something that happened often to potions with names that were too complicated, they acquired a mundane, simple name relatively fast.

“I don’t want to name it after me,” Severus went on, “I hope to invent many more notable potions that I’ll publish. Only Masters never inventing more than one have that potion named after them.” Having only one Snape Potion would be a shame. He hoped to invent many more. “That’s also the reason why I think naming it after Slytherin, who started research in that direction, would be misleading. I’m sure he contributed more than just this potion to the field.”

At that Sonja looked up. “Asking the parents-to-be and the surrogate to name the potion after them is on your list of ideas?”

Severus nodded. “I’ll write a letter later.”

“Maybe find something poetic in English? Like...Healed Hearts? They seemed so happy with the prospect of being parents that one time I met them.” Sonja set her knitting down and moved to pour herself a cup of herbal tea.

Picking up his quill and reaching for a fresh sheet of parchment, Severus made to start that list of
possible names. “That’s definitely an option. If you have more ideas just add them to the pile. We’ll sift through them later.”

Sonja’s laugh to that analogy filled Severus with warmth. How the return of his Lord and the fact that the man no longer was insane had changed everything. And for the better at that. Taking a deep breath, Severus gathered all his various notes into one stack intent on sorting through the ideas and identifying the best ones. After that he would write the letters for the three currently testing the potion. That felt like a productive end to his evening.

oooOOooo

Saturday, 20th of April 1996

Sitting down to an early breakfast – Marcus on the floor under the table with Nagini pretending it was their burrow, or something – Marvolo looked at the little pile of letters waiting by his plate.

With a sigh he filled his cup with tea, adding three spoons of sugar before stirring, and then reached for the fork on the plate of waffles to place some on his own plate. Before he tackled work, he needed to eat something.

The variety of food was impressive for a household of only two humans for most of the time. Ever since he had sorted out the problem between the two elves competing for the right to care for them, he had noticed a more regular change in what was offered for them to eat. Marvolo felt it might be that Flimm was learning new recipes from Henbane, or that the two of them were trying to one-up each other with their attempts to impress him.

He wasn’t about to complain.

After the waffles, Marvolo took a nicely toasted slice of bread, spreading cherry jam on it, and listening in with amusement as Marcus and Nagini discussed how good an idea it might be to stock up on grains for the winter when one was only eating mice and rats. Nagini didn’t see the point, but Marcus thought it an excellent way to lure in prey, eliminating the need to go out to hunt in the cold.

Smiling to himself, Marvolo steeled himself and picked up the topmost letter from the pile. It was from Severus. Surprised that the man was writing so soon after getting the order to find a better name for that potion, Marvolo flexed his magic to open the seal, unfurling the letter to read.

Lord Slytherin,

Below you will find the list of suggestions on how to name the potion currently referred to as the two-fathers potion. I also sent a letter to our first test group to ask if they would grant their permission to use their names as a possible alternative. The answer to that is still outstanding. I leave the decision in your capable hands.
Right below that followed a list of a mix of possible names, and Marvolo couldn’t help but snort at a few of the ideas. And at Severus’ audacity of pushing the task of choosing a name back to Marvolo. But as Severus had gone to the trouble to provide a number of choices, Marvolo felt it was not a case of avoiding a task. Maybe selecting a name himself would actually be better.

Picking up his third cup of tea, Marvolo once again read the list of proposed names, summoning himself a quill to make notes next to some of the ideas. Better work on this as long as Marcus was distracted by Nagini.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the different ideas for the potion name provided by:
Melphina
FiberBard
BlackSky83
libraryrocker
Catflower_Queen
a number of guests
blazevein
lao1980
Silverstargirl
Xiledwolf07
Dragonjek
MyNoseAgreesWithMe
Gurgaraneth
ani
julesa66
Thanatos147
randomplotbunny
Tinshaw
Q.N.Rowe
Evesgreenleaf
atoms_berries23
Tiiu
lipasnape
MsLessa
Pixie Moondust

I hope my attempt to write the process of searching for a name meets with your approval ;)

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Cloud

Chapter Notes

The big 100 is coming closer and closer. Thanks to your reviews and comments I can keep going even when I would rather do something else than write ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, 20th of April 1996

Amelia smiled down at her godson – it still was so new – who was sitting right next to her behind the protective wards of the training room, concentrated completely on the mock duel happening on the other side.

Marvolo was sweeping the floor with his opponents.

The two of them had appeared that morning at the Ministry, planning to let Marcus have a look at the place where Amelia worked and for Marvolo to get a look at the current trainee class of Aurors.

“What’s that one called?” Marcus suddenly asked, pointing to a young wizard on the ground fighting with his seemingly randomly flaying legs.

“The dancing feet spell. See how his legs are moving?” Amelia explained, grinning at Marvolo’s choice of spells. Every single one of the colourful jets of light that connected with one of the few junior Aurors or the trainees belonged to spells, jinxes, and charms usually used among Hogwarts students as pranks. Many of which were looked down upon by almost all junior Aurors – who proclaimed themselves to be above silly spells like those – and the more useless older Aurors.

“Looks funny.” Marcus decided, before turning his attention to where Marvolo was expertly dodging a Petrificus Totalus, spinning in place and sending another silent hex at one of the Aurors trying to sneak up behind him.

“It’s not, if you’re the one under its effect.” Amelia settled on saying to that, quite aware that she was one of the adults in place to shape Marcus’ perception of the world. And considering how she suspected Marvolo was still having trouble with empathy – she knew he was making an effort to change and work on the damage done to him by that curse, but still – providing the boy with an adult capable of compassion – or at least, one more of those – was probably a good idea.

Marcus made an agreeing noise his eyes practically glued to the duelling witches and wizards.

Suddenly one of the trainees was hanging upside down by an ankle, a wand clattering uselessly to the floor, rolling away.

Shaking her head, Amelia stood and called out to halt the duel. “Enough!” Everyone stopped moving, freezing where they stood. “That’s enough. Marvolo, let him down!”

Marvolo turned and winked at them before a flick of his wrist send the Auror crashing to the floor as the spell was released. “Thanks for the opportunity everyone. And thanks, Amelia, for asking
me to come help,” he said, waving one hand causing his slightly rumpled robes to straighten out, making him look as if the most strenuous thing he had done was a quick stroll around a garden somewhere.

“How’s that even possible?” one person murmured not quite quietly enough to go unheard.

“How’s what possible?” Amelia asked, taking down the ward protecting spectators from stray spells.

“That one wizard can hold his own against a greater number just using prank spells!” There was genuine frustration in that voice and Amelia sighed.

Meanwhile Marcus ran to where Marvolo had gone down on one knee holding his arms open for the boy to give him a hug. Marvolo stood, quickly turned on his heel, whirling in place, making the boy laugh.

Focusing back at her young Aurors, Amelia tried to find a diplomatic way to set them straight. But before she could even come up with a plan, Marvolo stepped in, his son held securely in his arm.

“As long as the greater numbers don’t work as a team, don’t know how to dodge, and get out of breath too easily it isn’t all that hard. Even with a limited number of spells,” Marvolo said, his smile wasn’t unkind, and his tone was friendly, but what he said was cutting deeply, judging by the looks on the others’ faces.

“And what do you recommend we do about that?” There was a mocking vibe to that question that irked Amelia. How dare those young, barely-trained, beginners insult a Lord of the Wizengamot, just because they had been shown how much they still had to learn?

But Marvolo seemed unfazed, another hint at just how much he had changed after he had been freed of that ancient curse. “Run every day to increase your stamina. Hold training duels, and battles, in varying teams and with restricted spell lists. And I’m not talking just nothing lethal, more like only three or four spells. That will force you to get creative with the spells you know. It might seem silly, but let me tell you, being confronted with something you don’t expect can throw even the most accomplished wizard or witch off kilter.”

Amelia was pretty sure he spoke from experience and not from recent experience, either. Who had cast a prank spell at You-Know-Who? And what had it been? Could she ask Marvolo about that? She wasn’t really sure. He always got uncomfortable when the past was brought up. Obviously embarrassed and ashamed about a lot of it.

“Changing up the lists and learning new spells also will help you avoiding the development of a signature move,” Marvolo continued his impromptu lesson. “Few get known for a special spell and don’t suffer for it. Just as Auror Moody is still well known for his constant vigilance, you can bet on being known and nicknamed among those you have to confront if you use one spell above the others. And being predictable is a drawback in a battle.”

Amelia was glad to see that Marvolo’s advice was being taken seriously, even as she caught some mutters from the back of the group sounding dissatisfied. It had been a good idea to ask him to help with the Auror Training Program.

“Want to see my office next, Marcus?” She ended the discussion before it could descend into the finer details of duelling. This visit was for Marcus, not for any of the adults. Showing the boy some duelling had been a good idea – Marcus was grinning from ear to ear, proud his father had won – but he surely would tire easily if they stayed to discus theory.
“Yeah!” Marcus called with enthusiasm, one hand curled tightly into the lapel of Marvolo’s robe.

“Then let’s go. Amelia, lead the way,” Marvolo declared, before giving an exaggerated bow, making Marcus giggle by almost tipping him on his head.

Amelia laughed at their antics and did lead the way to her office.

oooOOooo

“No Hermione, we were agreed, no talk about exams today,” Theo said decisively, laughter in his voice, making Harry grin.

Nodding along, Harry turned and walked backwards, giving the disgruntled Hermione a cheery smile. “I remember quite clearly that you agreed with the rest of us that we needed a day of relaxation. Something about avoiding the need for a calming draught, or a stay in the hospital wing. So try to relax, and banish revisions, exams, and OWLs from your head for the day.”

His bushy haired friend huffed, but nodded. “Very well. From now until tomorrow at breakfast, no one is going to mention our OWLs or any preparation for them.” Then a stubborn light entered her brown eyes. “But I insist on visiting the bookshop.”

They all laughed at that. Harry turned back around so he could see where he was walking not keen to fall over his own feet and end up in the hospital wing with a broken leg, missing this Hogsmeade weekend.

Luna skipped back up from where she had run ahead to look at something and linked her arm with Harry’s, humming something under her breath.

They hadn’t really made any plans for the day, only planning to go with whatever mood struck them, relaxing, and simply having a good time. Not that something sounding as simple as having a good time ever was as simple as it should be. Harry was pretty sure that with his bodyguards – his father had insisted on Messrs. Goyle and Crabbe acting in a protective capacity again – trailing them everywhere, relaxing would not be something that happened without effort.

They reached the edge of the village, already filled with all those students who had elected to go by carriage. In fact, it looked as if all students third year and up had decided to come. The nice warm and sunny weather certainly had had a part in that.

“Let’s go to Honeydukes first.” Harry made a decision after a few moments of aimless wandering. He really wanted to stock up on chocolate and maybe a few of the chewier sweets for their long study sessions.

“Sounds like a plan,” Draco conceded, his light summer cloak swinging open over his casual robes. And as none of their friends came up with an alternative, they turned their steps towards the sweet shop.

Over an hour later the group exited the shop again, each of them with a small bag filled with various sweets. It had been fun testing the new flavours on display. But in the end they all had pretty much selected the things they knew well.

“I’m going to the bookshop now,” Hermione declared, eager to go search for some new old book to
add to her collection.

“I’ll accompany you.” Daphne decided. “Maybe we can find something on the magical community in Bulgaria. If you’re going to accept Victor’s invitation, you should know a little more about the place. And by the way, I still think it would be better to talk with your great-uncle about this.”

“Oh, I will, don’t doubt that.” Hermione answered, waving her wand at her bag to shrink it down with a muttered incantation. “I really like Victor, but I want to study more after we graduate, not marry right out of school!” Harry grinned at his friend’s exasperated tone at the thought of doing something like that.

Theo snorted. “I don’t think you need to fear him trying to trick you into a marriage, Hermione. You’re the one with more social standing here, and on top of that, he respects you too much to do something that ridiculous.”

Hermione only made some noncommittal noise to that and waited for Daphne to catch up before moving off in the direction of the book store.

Harry turned to Luna, who was standing next to him, occupied with a colourful sugar quill. “You said you wanted to have a look at one of the shops further down that street?” There were some smaller shops down that street filled with odds and ends that might interest a student. It felt like some of those charity shops aunt Petunia had visited from time to time, searching for some unusual paintings, ornaments, or other decorations she used to impress the neighbours.

“Let’s meet back here at one before we head to the Three Broomsticks for lunch?” Ron asked, getting sounds of agreement from all around before the group broke up, each of them going where they wanted.

Walking down the street holding Luna’s hand, swinging their intertwined hands between them was oddly peaceful.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Luna said with a serene smile on her face, upturned to the sun, eyes closed.

“It is,” Harry agreed, assuming that Luna was talking about the weather. It wasn’t always easy to know what exactly she was talking about at any given moment. “Are you looking for something specific?” A small bell sounded as Mr. Goyle opened the door, making sure it was safe to go in before Harry was allowed to follow.

“Something for Daddy when I come back home,” Luna said, following the huge wizard inside, looking around curiously.

Harry started looking around as well. Maybe he would find something for Marcus, and maybe even Marvolo. The shelves were standing close together and were packed with the oddest things. Not like the shop Harry had ended up in after that one disastrous floo trip just before second year. There were no warning signs not to touch things because of curses. But the selection was varied. Here there was a small clock with an owl – looking like it was animated wood – walking up and down a branch, blinking slowly, a set of blocks with letters on them, switching back and forth between the letters and animals starting with that letter. If half of the blocks hadn’t been missing, it might have been a nice expansion on those that Marcus already had at home.

Harry sauntered through the small space between shelves, stopping whenever he came across something interesting. A letter opener in the form of a bird – the beak was the part opening the letter – flapping tired wings, a creepy-looking doll missing an eye, a pair of dice rolling themselves, a candlestick decorated with vines, and a stack of board games.
In the end Harry found a small dragon toy for Marcus and a book on different Asian fairy tales he thought might be of interest to Marvolo.

“What have you found?” Harry asked once Luna joined him at the front before the register, which was manned by a cheery witch.

“Nothing much. But this,” she held up a delicate chain from which dangled something vaguely leaf-shaped of silver colour, “is a passable good-luck charm.”

“That’s a Sickle, my dear,” The witch at the register – was she the one owning this shop? Harry wasn’t sure – said, holding her hand out for the silver coin Luna fished out of one of her pockets.

Harry placed his purchases in his own pocket, while Luna slipped the charm around her neck to dangle right next to the butterbeer corks she had strung onto a length of some yellow cord.

“The sun is high,” Luna observed, and Harry didn’t even try to hide his grin.

“You’re right. We should head back to Honeydukes to meet up with the others.” And so they did exactly that.

When they arrived, only Ron and Neville were already there.

“Hungry, Ron?” Harry asked when they were near enough that he didn’t need to shout.

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Ron wanted to know, grinning. “What would mum say? I’m a growing lad!”

Harry laughed right along with the others at Ron’s attempt to imitate his mother’s voice.

And then he saw a dark cloud moving much too quickly, coming in from the direction opposite of where Hogwarts castle was.

“What’s that?” he asked, feeling kind of light headed, watching what looked like a thunderstorm cloud moving over the sky.

“What’s what?” Ron asked, confused and turning his head this way and that to look around.

“That,” Luna said oddly calm, pointing one hand straight at the mass that was most decidedly not a cloud.

Then the call of a raven or crow – Harry didn’t really know the difference – made the situation clear.

Those were birds.

A big mass of birds all heading for the village.

Harry remembered some half-seen scenes of a horror film with birds Dudley had seen a few years back, and then a scream from someone on the street broke the spell.

There were not many reasons Harry could think of for why a cloud made of birds would be heading towards Hogsmeade on a Hogsmeade weekend. And his two bodyguards probably thought the same, because hands were on his shoulders, trying to manoeuvre him towards Honeydukes, which was the nearest building.

But inside Harry’s head echoed the few facts he knew of the previous attacks from the so-called Howler Terrorist. If the room for incoming mail at the Prophet hadn’t been warded, the whole
building could have been destroyed. How even a few of those howlers had wreaked havoc in the Minister’s office. How even that one howler that had found him in France had exploded.

Harry was about to follow his bodyguards when he spotted a bunch of third-year girls cowering next to a building, practically out in the open. His left hand moved to the portkey around his neck, while his right hand suddenly held his wand. There was no time to call help, or get everyone away from the street. And even that wasn’t a guaranteed success.

Harry knew that it was a dumb idea, but he was pretty sure that he couldn’t live with himself if he didn’t at least try.

Aware that it was a bad idea – really bad, he would be in trouble later – but that it should work in theory, that intent and the words he picked were important, Harry stopped going along with being dragged away, locked his eyes on the birds, each carrying something red, and hissed, concentrating hard on what he wanted to happen.

`:Shield us from harm:`.

Warmth spread through Harry’s whole body, and something that reminded him of wind left through his wand before a shimmering shield came into existence over the part of the street Harry could see.

Then, while hearing screams, shouts, and birds screeching, Harry passed out.

ooOoo

Professor Flitwick had needed to pick her up early, but she didn’t mind being early when she got to be at Hogwarts for the time she would be waiting. Carisma had acquired a few more patients in the magical world since she had started to work with young Harry and later Lord Slytherin. She was pretty sure the maybe-former Dark Lord hadn’t spoken with anyone about the fact that he was working with a squib mind healer, but judging by the people searching her out, it was possible that the man’s personal Healer had recommended her to his other patients.

Currently she was sitting in the room they were using for their appointments, reading one of the books from her pile of books she wanted to read by her bed. It was nice to have the time to do a bit of reading.

A little bit later – the book was engaging enough to let her lose track of time – there were hurried steps and raised voices in the main part of the infirmary, sparking her curiosity. She closed her book, stood from the chair, and walked to the open door.

The matron – Poppy Pomfrey – was running around frantically, but with purpose. Waving her wand, preparing beds, and setting up potions.

“Was someone injured?” Carisma asked, concerned. This was a Hogsmeade weekend – the reason the professor had had to pick her up early, and that Harry wasn’t here yet – and because of that, many children out and about in the village were at risk of accidents more than usual.

“There was an attack on the village. Filius and Pomona plan to evacuate the whole population to the castle, alongside the students. I have no idea if anyone is hurt. But I need to prepare for the worst.” The witch turned towards where Carisma stood near the door to the private room. “I think
it would be best if you waited somewhere out of the way.”

For a moment Carisma was speechless. While she wasn’t able to cast magic, she was an adult with some medical schooling and common sense.

She took a deep breath and gave the mediwitch a hard look. “I’m capable of asking questions, and of handing out calming draughts. I can do triage if you tell me where the people will arrive.”

To Madam Pomfrey’s credit she only did two slow blinks before adjusting to the new information and its possibilities. “The worst cases will be flooed in directly. But all others will come in through the big front doors. I think you can help there. You can take down that basket with potions.”

Not willing to lose time over arguing, Carisma picked up the basket and left the infirmary. It was easier than usual to reach the ground floor and with it the big entrance hall. It almost felt as if the castle was assisting her in her quest to move quickly.

Professor Snape and his wife, as well as the man with his cat she had seen several times in the castle were already there. Preparing.

Stepping up to the wizard in dark robes, Carisma asked for directions. “Madame Pomfrey sends this basket of potions, Professor Snape. I might be a squib, but I do have basic medical training and regularly refresh my training for first aid. I want to help.”

Behind the wizard one of the long benches from the Great Hall was placed along one wall by some of the elves living at the castle. His dark eyes scanned her, face almost too calm and collected. “Set up near the doors over there.” He waved his hand to indicate the spot he was talking about. “Make sure all children and townspeople with visible injuries move over to where Professor McGonagall will set up, hand out calming draughts to those who need them, and keep an eye out for shock.”

There was no room for happiness at being accepted by a wizard as Carisma did exactly as she had been instructed. Such an emergency situation needed people in charge who knew what they were doing. It looked as if Severus Snape – the new Lord Prince as she had read in the Prophet she still had a subscription to – knew what he was doing.

Other adults arrived and were sent to different parts of the hall by Snape, before the first carriages – supervised by the enormous man Hagrid – arrived, pouring out children, adults, and students fleeing from the village.

“Come here dear.” Carisma greeted the first girl reaching her. One sleeve of her robe was ripped, and the palms of her hands looked as if she had tried to break her fall on a place covered with gravel. “Did you fall?”

“I was running.” The girl looked to be around sixteen and was shaking. “And I think I tripped?”

Carisma plucked one of the small phials filled with a lavender-tinted milky liquid out of her supply and handed it to the girl. “Here, that will help you calm down. Do you have any pain?”

The girl looked at her hands before accepting the unstoppered potion. “My hands and knees hurt. But that’s all, I guess.”

“Do you see those benches over there?” A few of the long benches had been arranged into a small waiting area, where they were supposed to send lightly injured people, and which had been marked off with floating yellow banners. “Go over there and sit down so that the professors can help you with your hands and knees.”
The girl nodded, mumbled a “Thanks.” and moved over to sit down where she had been told.

Before Carisma could do more than dunk her hands in a bowl of water mixed with a potion to clean them, an adult – probably living down in the village – stood before her, one eye almost swollen shut. “I think I got something in my eye, ma’am.”

“Looks likely,” Carisma agreed and felt that this was going to be a long long day.

In the next moments, she got to see many different injuries. Hands and knees skinned by falling, broken arms or legs when people did fall farther than just from standing to the floor, or when someone got stepped on after falling. There were a lot of bruises, a few bleeding from wounds on the head, and many who had been shaken by what had happened.

Just by listening to the people she came in contact with, she got a vague idea about what had happened down at the village.

“It was such a fine day! And then suddenly it got dark, and the goats tried to get into the barn. Toppled me right over in their panic!” one older wizard complained while Carisma tried to get him to accept the calming draught.

“I think I sprained my ankle when that shimmery barrier suddenly sprang up from nowhere!”

“These were demon birds! I’m sure of it!”

“My parents will never allow me to visit the village again when they hear of the explosions!”

Roughly twenty patients in, Carisma was pretty sure that the Howler Terrorist had attempted another attack, his biggest yet, and somehow the whole village had been shielded.

Only when she saw two big wizards carrying in a small figure with unruly dark hair did she get a vague picture of just who might have had a hand in the magical rescue of that many people.

Knowing that she herself could do nothing for Henry Slytherin-Potter, and that Madam Pomfrey didn’t have that many urgent cases to care for, Carisma refrained from running to the boy’s side, instead once more cleaning her hands and turning to the next terrified student coming to her for help.

Sirius watched as Marvolo Slytherin, probably still a Dark Lord, but currently very much the concerned parent, paced up and down in his most formal parlour at Grimmauld Place. It had been half an hour by now since the man had appeared on his doorstep, young Marcus at his side and worry on his face.

“Do you want something to eat, Marcus?” Sirius turned to ask of the small boy sitting in one of the armchairs, hugging his own knees, watching Slytherin pace with worried eyes. He got a small nod in return and managed not to sigh.

“Kreacher!” he called for the elf, and after he had popped into the room, bowing, gave his orders. “Please prepare some tea, hot chocolate, and snacks for my guests. And when you’re done with that, have a look around and see if you can find something for Marcus to play with.”
Kreacher nodded and, against Sirius’ expectations, opened his mouth to ask a question. “Might Kreacher ask Flimm get something from Griffin House?”

“That sounds like a good idea.” Sirius almost jumped from his seat when Lord Slytherin spoke unexpectedly.

Dismissing his elf with a nod, Sirius watched as the other man forced his mannerisms and face to be a lot calmer than he could possibly be.

Once the requested refreshments had made an appearance on the table, it didn’t take long for Marcus to move over to a corner of the room suddenly filled with different toys, books, and games as well as an elf, which Sirius was pretty sure was Flimm.

Now that the child was taken care of, Sirius turned to the agitated wizard currently stirring the fourth spoonful of sugar into his tea. “Could you possibly inform me what exactly is happening? I gathered that there’s something happening in Hogsmeade, and you’re waiting for more news?” In fact, Sirius still felt a little as if he had been run over by a car. It had seemed a bad idea to refuse entry to Lord Slytherin when he had showed up, if only for the child’s safety, but Sirius had no real information beside that simple statement.

“We were visiting Amelia at the Ministry, when an Auror trainee found us in the Wizengamot chamber to inform her about an attack at the village and that help was required. She told me to stay out of the way and that I would be informed as soon as there was news.” The spoon was placed down with so much control that Sirius felt just a little bit more pressure would snap the silver. Not that he would have been sad to see that piece of bad taste gone.

“I guess Harry had plans to go to the village, and you haven’t heard from him yet?” Sirius asked in an attempt to keep the man speaking.

“Harry and his friends most certainly were at the village this morning. He said they had agreed to make a day out of not studying.” Slytherin emptied his cup and set it down, betraying his trembling hands through the rattling sound of the cup on the saucer. “I insisted on bodyguards. But I have heard from neither them nor Harry so far.”

Sirius nodded, the communication mirrors were really useful devices. So much faster than owl post. “Harry probably left both mirrors in his dormitory. And if the old protocols are still in place, the students probably are gathered in the Great Hall. He wouldn’t be able to get it to contact either of us.” Whether he said that to assure Lord Slytherin or himself, Sirius wasn’t sure. “Can’t the bodyguards send a message via patronus?” It would indicate that there was a problem if the bodyguards could have sent a message but didn’t.

But Slytherin was already shaking his head, levitating tea and sugar into his cup without lifting the containers. “They are really good at keeping an eye on a crowd, sensing possible danger. And at getting an individual out of a tight spot. But as far as I’m aware, they can’t cast a patronus.”

For a moment Sirius contemplated asking about other means of communication. There surely was still something in place from before Lord Slytherin had reclaimed a spot in society. But that was a sensitive topic he might better leave alone.

“I wanted to ask if I can leave Marcus here if I’m needed at Hogwarts.” Slytherin suddenly broke the silence that had fallen between them.

Before his mind had completely considered what that might mean, Sirius nodded. “Of course.
Marcus is a delight to have around. He’ll be safe here.”

“Thank you,” Slytherin said, picking up his second cup of tea. “I have my elf waiting for information with the order to bring it here the moment a letter reaches my postbox or any of the houses.”

Sirius took that to mean that there still were connections in place that could provide Slytherin with information faster than normal channels of communication.

Not willing to speak about the next Wizengamot session, or engage in useless small talk, Sirius let another silence descend over the room, only occasionally broken by giggling and explosions from where Marcus was playing exploding snap with both Kreacher and Flimm.

When the shimmering form of a patronus, that of a cat, sauntered into the room through the wall, both men tensed in their seats.

“Lord Slytherin. I want to inform you that your son currently is residing in the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey is sure that he will recover. But you might want to come to Hogwarts regardless. You can use the floo to my office.”

The patronus wasn’t even completely faded before Lord Slytherin was out of his seat. “May I use your floo, Lord Black?”

“Be my guest,” Sirius answered, standing as well. “Please inform me if there is any development.”

“Of course.” Slytherin answered, before going over to inform Marcus that he would be leaving to look after Harry.

After watching the man leave – Slytherin knew the house well enough to find the floo on his own – Sirius walked over to sit with Marcus and the elves, and play a round of exploding snap. Hopefully it would work well to distract him while they were waiting.

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“Lady Black. I have a message for you. I want to inform you that your son currently is residing in the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey is sure that he will recover. But you might want to come to Hogwarts regardless. You can use the floo to my office.”

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dome of some kind over the whole village. My guess is that’s the reason we don’t see more
damage than we do.”

Conceding the point, Dora turned slowly in a circle. “Creating that many howlers must have taken
lots of time. Do you think we could use that to eliminate some suspects from the list? We know
whoever this is works at the Ministry. It’s a wizard most likely. Probably doesn’t have a kid at
Hogwarts who was out in the village today,” she mused out loud, recounting part of the clues they
had so far, which had proven to be a useful technique.

“He obviously isn’t happy with how the case of Lord Slytherin was handled.” Dawlish added what
Dora had learned from the Egyptians and the targets the terrorist had attempted to harm, and the
fragments of the text that had been written.

“Well, considering that there are many people who don’t have any children at Hogwarts, and how
many people probably still are unhappy with Lord Slytherin for the past, or his more recent
actions…” Dora trailed off, thinking about the changes to the werewolf laws and how it still was
only a tiny step in the right direction.

Kingsley sighed. “Let’s comb through the debris and see if we can find anything more.”

And so they did just that, and all the while Dora thought about who might be desperate enough to
basically risk killing all children in Britain between thirteen and seventeen. Who would do that?

The thought that someone who had lost their child might be able to fall that far didn’t leave Dora
for even a moment while they searched the village. But even as she could think of one man who
would match all criteria – including the lost child – they needed evidence. Maybe she would be
able to get a search permit for the house once they were done here. But they definitely needed
more than just her hunch to act.

oooOOooo

If one didn’t count the portraits of all past – and dead – Headmasters, the office was empty when
Marvolo arrived by floo. Not even the phoenix was there. For a moment Marvolo wondered where
the bird had gone, but the fact that his son was in the infirmary was much more important at the
moment. So he left the office, hurried down the steps, and made his way to the infirmary.

In the hall in front of the hospital wing, Marvolo met a few students with bandages and ripped
clothes. Nothing too dire, but they looked shaken.

Taking a few deep breaths, Marvolo calmed himself down – or tried to – before he opened the door
and stepped in.

The image he saw wasn’t all that bad. A few children were lying in beds, arms or legs immobilised,
probably because they were broken. Around a few more beds the curtains were drawn, and all in
all the room had the usual calm quality about it that Marvolo remembered from his few visits here.

He decided to take it as a good sign that there was no hurried running around and no sobbing
parents.

“Lord Slytherin!” Madam Pomfrey called from the entrance to one of the private rooms. “That was
fast. Come here, please.”
Going as fast as he could without running, Marvolo hurried over to where the medi-witch was waiting for him, looking harried. “Madame Pomfrey, the Headmistress said my son is here?”

“Yes. He’s severely exhausted. No idea how much magic he used! But he’ll recover after decent rest. Currently he’s sleeping. Mr. Goyle and Mr. Crabbe brought him here, and then went down to give what information they could to the Aurors.”

She moved out of the way so that Marvolo could step into the room where the first thing he saw was his son in a bed, under the blanket looking much too small and pale.

“If it’s alright with you, Madam, I would like to stay here and wait for him to wake.” Before she had a chance to answer he had moved one of the chairs without even touching his wand, setting it down right next to the bed so he could keep an eye on his son and the door at the same time.

“Of course you can stay. Please call for me should he wake, and make sure he stays in bed.” Without waiting for him to answer, she was gone, probably to see after her other patients.

Seemed as if today was a day without much regard for social niceties. But seeing everything that had happened, that wasn’t the worst.

Settling into the chair, adding a charm to make it more comfortable, Marvolo prepared to wait.

ooOoo

He felt as if he had been run over by a car. Or as if he hadn’t been fast enough during a game of Harry-Hunting. But not exactly.

It was hard to open his eyes, and Harry contemplated just turning over and going back to sleep as an alternative to opening his eyes, when the noise of someone shifting in their chair changed that plan.

Who would be sitting at his bedside? Maybe Hermione? Or one of the Slytherins? Neville? It made Harry feel good that he had so many more friends than just last year.

Before the summer that had changed everything.

Carefully opening his eyes Harry saw nothing clearly at first.

Then a big dark shadow moved, murmuring “Let me get your glasses, Harry,” as he stood from his chair.

Marvolo had been sitting with him.

Harry was pretty sure that he shouldn’t be surprised about that by now.

His glasses were carefully placed on his nose and over his ears, bringing his surroundings into focus. After that Marvolo helped Harry to put a pillow behind his head so he could see the chair better than he could have lying on his back.

“What have you done, Harry?” Marvolo asked, sitting down again, folding his hands in his lap. His father was much too calm for Harry’s peace of mind.
Harry swallowed, feeling nervous all of a sudden. He had known that Marvolo would be unhappy the moment that idea had entered his mind.

“What happened? I haven’t heard anything…” Harry trailed off pretty sure that it wouldn’t be a good idea to bring up the fact that he had passed just now.

“What I know is that there was an attack on the village. Howlers, by all accounts. And that a shimmering magical barrier that no one could explain reduced the damage. There were broken bones and other minor injuries caused by people falling. But no one was killed or seriously injured.” Now Marvolo gave him a dark look. “No one but you, that is.”

“Well,” Harry wasn’t really sure where to begin or how to explain why he had risked himself. Hermione probably would claim that he had a *saving-people-thing*. “When I saw that dark cloud and realised that it was made of birds, each carrying a howler, all those other attacks came to mind. There was no way that the houses would be safe, or that everyone would manage to get out of the village!” Harry wished that his voice was a little bit stronger so he could make Marvolo understand why there had been no other way.

“Calm down, Harry,” Marvolo said, placing one hand on the leg nearest to him. “I can’t pretend that I don’t wish you had found another solution. Or that you simply had run. I think I know you better than that by now. I simply wish to understand what exactly you did and why.”

Harry took a deep breath and tried to relax back into his pillows. “I thought about using the portkey, but that wouldn’t help all the others. Then our discussion how to use Parselmagic to protect others popped into my mind. I knew it was probably too big a place to protect. But I had clear intent, and I remembered the words you agreed would be useful to shield myself and Marcus if it was ever necessary. So I simply… did it.” And it seemed as if it truly had worked.

That was kind of crazy.

Marvolo blinked slowly. “I knew that Parselmagic could achieve incredible things if the one using it was of strong mind and will. That one, not even fully grown wizard, would be able to shield a village from explosions… That’s surprising.” If Harry had to describe his father in that moment he would say that Marvolo seemed more than surprised.

“I did repair that tapestry when all the experts told Sirius he would need to have a new one done,” Harry reminded his father of his other unauthorized use of Parselmagic.

“That could have been a case of trying to sell something new,” Marvolo pointed out, but shrugged, before he stood. “I had to promise Madam Pomfrey that I would inform her the moment you wake. And Marcus will want to know that you’re on the mend.”

Already feeling the little bit of energy leaving him again, Harry only nodded and yawned. “Please tell him that I’m fine, if a little tired.” He felt himself smile, and grabbed the hand Marvolo held out, before the older wizard left the room to speak with the medi-witch.

Harry listened to the voices from outside the private room he was in, getting a glimpse of a robed arm as he tried to peek through the door to see what was happening. It seemed he had a guard standing at his door.

A few moments later – Harry was too tired to keep track of time, but it didn’t feel like he had waited long – Madam Pomfrey came bustling in, a potions phial in her hand and a frown on her face. “Mr. Slytherin, I have to say it’s a wonder how you manage to land in my infirmary so consistently. And always because of some dangerous situation.”
Harry wasn’t sure what to say to this, so he kept silent even as he could have protested that he really wasn’t at fault for many of his visits. In second year Lockhart had vanished his bones, that were only broken because Dobby had hexed the bludger.

“Here, take this. It’ll help you recover faster from your exhaustion. And you have to accept that you’re not allowed to perform any magic until I give you the all clear. In all my years here at the school, never…” She rambled on but Harry didn’t really have the energy to pay attention.

He accepted the phial, downed the potion, and nodded to her instruction not to use any magic until he was rested.

Rest and sleep sounded like a really good idea right now.

Before Marvolo came back from informing Harry’s godfather and Marcus that Harry would make a full recovery, the teenager was sleeping peacefully once again.

oooOOooo

He was furious! How could that have happened?

Everyone was saying that it was almost a miracle that not one person had died, that no one had been seriously injured. With the possibilities of magic, everyone would be fine before the new week began.

How could that be?

He stalked from one end of the house to the other. Whatever he found that could be destroyed by throwing it to the floor he picked up and smashed it. All remaining parchment had been shredded, his potions spilled.

Why had his plan failed?

How was that even possible?

There were rumours that magic herself had intervened, shielded her chosen and the precious children from harm.

He had needed to bite his own tongue when he had heard that.

How could people be that foolish?

If there was something like an entity magic, wouldn’t that entity have protected his son?

But short of divine intervention, he really wasn’t sure what could have thwarted the number of howlers he had addressed to various students of Hogwarts and residents of Hogsmeade.

Maybe he really needed to be more active and brave, act himself, out in the open. Maybe this was a sign.

Chapter End Notes
I have build up to this chapter for quite some time. I hope this was a nice action chapter. And sorry that this chapter didn't include the name of the potion ;)

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published on the 26th of April 2019
Next chapter planned for 10th of May 2019
In the last chapter I managed to give Mrs. Goyle her second given name (simply forgot that I already had given her a first name previously) :D So she now will be known as Patricia Carisma Goyle, who prefers to be called Carisma. By the time this will be published I’ll have changed chapter 24 to match that new name. (I need to work on my note keeping of names for OCs)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday, 21st of April 1996

Another man walked forward to the dais set at one wall, falling to his knees in front of the wizard sitting in the ornate chair placed there. Red eyes met with brown for seemingly endless moments, before the man stood back up again on wobbly legs, bowing before retreating to make space for the next to come forward.

Lucius was watching the whole scene enfold from the edge of the crowd, as he had been one of the first called before his Lord, to open his mind. Now he was standing here, reminded of the few times that a raid or mission had failed so spectacularly that the Dark Lord had suspected treason among their ranks, resorting to Legilimency to find the supposed traitor. But at the same time as this was eerily familiar, the differences were the real reason he was standing here, working to not chuckle like a lunatic.

For one, after being finished, each Death Eater walked over to a basket filled with small phials of a special headache potion, getting one to combat the inevitable pain after a Legilimens pranced around in their brains.

Then there was the fact that the pain had been minimal, not at all the searing burn it had been in the past. Either his Lord had reached a new level of competence in his ability, making it possible to avoid inflicting pain, or he hadn’t cared before. Lucius was inclined to believe that his Lord had enjoyed causing others pain back then over the idea of the man not being a Master Legilimens before now.

But the most bewildering change was the buffet Lucius was standing next to.

It was a more-than-elaborate buffet. In fact it would have fit right in with the offerings Narcissa would have the elves prepare for one of her functions. There was a section of the table dedicated to sweet things – it seemed as if it was bigger than the other parts – from small elaborate cakes, to candied fruits, and small bowls of different creams and custards. And they were delicious, too. Then there were several platters with sandwiches – from cucumber to chicken – small sausages encased in pastry dough, cheese, small bread rolls, and so on. A whole piglet, lamb, duck were presented on platters. Lucius was sure it was more food than all the people currently present could eat in a day.

Hopefully this wouldn’t take that long, though. It was late in the night on Sunday. Lucius really
wished to be home with his wife and daughter after a long day fielding the press on behalf of the Minister.

After that attack on the village, the public had demanded immediate action. And delivering that action wasn’t really all that easy. Most of the day had been spent assessing the damage done to the village, healing those who had been injured, and planning what else was to be done. The Headmistress had agreed to offer sanctuary to everyone living in Hogsmeade that didn’t want to – or couldn’t – return to their homes right away. Hogwarts’ wards were of the best quality, and it was the only place with enough spare rooms to accommodate that many people. There was no doubt that the castle had been built with the possibility in mind that it would need to provide shelter for a large number of people.

“Can you recommend something?” someone asked of Lucius, who turned to look at who had snug up on him.

“Benjamin.” Lucius nodded in greeting. “I haven’t tried a lot yet. But the Creme Brulee is quite good.”

Paying more attention to the buffet and its offerings than to Lucius, Benjamin addressed his fellow Death Eater, acting casually, but fooling no one. “I’m beyond curious who or what was the cause of the shield that saved the day. You wouldn’t possibly know more than the rumours tell?”

Lucius placed the empty phial he had been toying with down on the buffet table, where it promptly vanished, and picked up a small bowl of a chocolate mousse he hadn’t tried yet, before he answered that loaded question. “I certainly could speculate. But I guess that would be foolish of me.” Not that Lucius wasn’t curious after the urgent and short letter he had received from his son. “I think the speculation of that many minds focused on the same objective being the cause is the most plausible I have heard so far.”

Benjamin picked a pastry filled with something that looked like cherries and leisurely turned to look at Lucius. “Really? By all accounts I heard, the thing on most minds was panic. And looking back over history doesn’t turn up even one other instance of something like this happening. And there were more disasters compelling the people to think of safety in our history than one can comfortably count.”

Lucius held in a sigh. So Benjamin had also got news from his son – his elder son, to be precise – and was trying to confirm that their Lord’s heir had had something to do with the shield. Their Lord had been silent on the topic so far, and Lucius had to assume, for the moment, that they should keep this under wraps as much as they were able.

“What do you want me to say? I’m not an Unspeakable and therefore not an expert on unusual magical occurrences.” Hopefully Benjamin would catch on quickly.

For a moment there was silence between them, Benjamin eating his pastry and the both of them watching a moron being cursed for speaking out of turn to someone he wanted to impress, risking their operations by what Lucius could catch from the rant their Lord was not exactly shouting.

Waving his wand at his hands to get rid of the stickiness of the pastry, Benjamin hummed as the next Death Eater walked up to their Lord. “I’m no expert on this either. Do you think our Lord had the time to look into this? Such unusual magic should be something he would be interested in. Isn’t it?”

Lucius gave the other a flat look, only to get a small smirk in return. Infuriating man. “Has anyone really had any time for anything? This is the first proper meal not rushed between getting from one
place to the other since the attack. I guess our Lord has even more on his plate than either of us.”

Once again Benjamin hummed, turning back to the buffet to pick up a small pumpkin pastry, carefully moving around two more men taking something to eat. “I guess you’re right, Lucius. I’ll try to refrain from speculating, and just be grateful that Theo wasn’t harmed.”

Lucius nodded. He too was grateful that Draco hadn’t been harmed, or any of the other children. “Yes. That nobody was seriously harmed is truly something to be grateful for.” And if they both were right in their speculation, their Lord’s heir most likely had something to do with the miraculous shield. And most of wizarding Britain might be in debt to a boy of not yet sixteen.

When another Death Eater came their way, clearly interested to chat, Lucius wished that Severus was here. Hiding behind a potion-centric discussion would be perfect about now. But in light of the fact that Severus was a Master Occlumens, and quite capable of keeping anyone from his thoughts, it was reasonable that the man wouldn’t be here.

Rolling his eyes at Benjamin, who quickly smothered a smirk, Lucius gave in to the inevitable and started a verbal sparring match with the lower Ministry officials in their Lord’s ranks.

ooOoo

With a weary sigh Marvolo sat down heavily in his chair behind the desk in his study at Headquarters. It had been a long evening.

Before Marvolo even could come up with the energy to call for Henbane and ask for a headache potion and something to eat, both just popped into existence right in front of him on the desk, while unfinished paperwork, letters and the like, were piled up to the side of the desk.

Reaching for the potion phial first, Marvolo murmured a “Thank you, Henbane.” into the air, sure that the elf would be able to hear. With no dithering around, the cork was popped out of the phial and the potion tossed back. Performing Legilimency on that many people was draining and had left him with a slight headache.

Making a face, Marvolo decided to not think on all the much-too-personal details he had learned during his search for a possible accomplice to the Howler Terrorist in the ranks of his people. Instead he moved on to take a good look at the plate of food his elf had helpfully provided.

There was a sandwich with some kind of venison and a mayonnaise-based spread, as well as a small pile of sticks of carrot and cucumber. By far the biggest part of the plate was occupied by sweets though. Pumpkin pasties – two of them – miniature waffles with chocolate sauce, a cauldron cake, and fresh berries.

It didn’t take Marvolo long to finish the food, starting with the sandwich and vegetables because he needed to get into the habit of eating the healthy things first. When Mrs. Peters had pointed out that Marcus had started to imitate Marvolo’s eating habits, he had realized that he would need to make an effort to be a responsible adult and a good example for his younger son.

It really was late, but in the hopes that Harry might just be awake, Marvolo picked up the mirror he constantly had on his person and turned the reflective surface towards himself before activating it.

“Father!” Harry answered in such short a time that Marvolo was sure the mirror had been close at
hand and Harry had been waiting.

“Harry. You look as if you should be sleeping.” And the boy did. He was too pale, even in the low light of the hospital wing, and had bags under his eyes.

“Then you shouldn’t have sent Professor Snape to bring the mirror, father.” There was a slight chididing tone in that answer, and Marvolo wasn’t sure if he should be angry or amused.

“I wanted to make sure that we have a fast way of communication. But you’re right. I assumed you would stay up so we could talk.” A tray with a cup, teapot, sugar dish, and a small plate with biscuits popped onto the table, another reminder from Henbane that Marvolo needed to drink and eat enough.

“What have you been up to? What’s new?” Harry asked, changing topics rather quickly in a way Marvolo could understand perfectly. He didn’t really want to discuss his sleeping habits either.

“The Ministry is currently wrapped up in sorting out how to rebuild the village, and how to secure it better. I have checked to see if I missed something among my people. Beside one who bragged a little too much to some witches about being a Death Eater, I didn’t find anyone involved with the whole howler mess.” He didn’t see a reason to share the instances of unusual sexual practices or domestic violence with his son. He might plan to do something about the latter – the first might inspire some research out of curiosity over human nature – but he didn’t need to tell his son about the private matters of others.

“That’s good?” Harry sounded unsure, and Marvolo nodded.

“It is good. Because I like to think that I had enough intelligence left even back then to select people as my followers who would know better than to do something like that to reach their goals. On the other hand, that leaves quite a few more possible suspects still out there.” At least he now had only mostly reasonable people in his ranks. He pinched the bridge of his nose when the two cases of domestic violence came to mind.

“Will you keep me updated?” Harry asked, yawning.

“If you promise to follow Healer Greengrass’ and Madam Pomfrey’s directions so you’ll recover faster.” Marvolo demanded with a grin on his face. They both were Slytherins. Why should he just follow along with Harry’s demand?

Harry snorted and rolled his eyes. “She says that I’m not allowed to use any magic, and that I need to stay in bed. Do you know how utterly boring that is?”

“I could bring Nagini over to keep you company?” Marvolo suggested, imagining the way his familiar would curl up on top of Harry, making sure that he stayed in bed in her own unique way.

The glare Harry send him to that was withering. “Don’t you dare! And I don’t think Madame Pomfrey, or Professor McGonagall, would allow her to stay at the castle anyway.”

“Probably not.” Marvolo conceded. “And will you follow Madam Pomfrey’s directions?”

Harry huffed. “I guess. If I’m going to do that, I’ll probably should end this call and go to sleep. You should do the same.”

“Probably.” Marvolo grinned when Harry rolled his eyes at that. “I’ll finish up some things, after that’s done I’ll go home. I want you to decide if you want it to be known that it was you who created the shield, or not. The sooner I know, the better. Pleasant dreams, Harry.”
Harry glared again, and ignored that request when he answered. “Pleasant dreams! And don’t stay up too long. I’m not above asking Healer Greengrass to monitor your sleep!” As threats went, that one was weak and strong at the same time. While Malcolm Greengrass was his personal healer and therefore had some authority, he also was a Death Eater and under Marvolo’s authority because of that.

“I don’t think that will be necessary. There isn’t much left to do, and I’ll take a dose of sleeping draught so that I’ll get enough rest.” Harry relaxed after Marvolo had said that, and they quickly ended their call, leaving Marvolo to finish his letters before going home.

The next week was going to be taxing. He really should get enough rest.

Monday, 22nd of April 1996

He was watching the meandering patterns that the rain and the wind created on the window right next to his bed. They were kind of interesting, forming little rivers that vanished as quickly as they had come, running around spots every single time where there probably was some dirt stuck to the window.

It was mesmerizing.

Oh, who was he kidding? He was bored out of his mind by now. And starting to get frustrated with the lack of activity. Watching the rain out of the window was at least something to do.

Hopefully his friends would bring him something to read after lessons were over for the day. Even the book for History of Magic would be fine.

Flopping back to his back, staring at the ceiling, Harry thought about the Howler Terrorist and Marvolo’s request that he needed to decide what the public should get to know.

If he said yes to inform the public, he would get even more attention. But that would be for something he had actually done. Not for his mother’s sacrifice, his name, or the fact that he had been adopted, but for magic he had actually cast.

Did he really want everyone to know that he had performed magic that had even impressed Marvolo? The man wasn’t that easy to impress.

No, he really rather would not be known to be able to perform magic on a level that others thought to be impossible. The possibility of fear of someone more powerful, of Unspeakables demanding to use him for their research, mindless fans wanting something from him, and anything else he had not thought of, wasn’t an appealing outlook.

But would it hurt their community not to know where the shield had come from? Harry wasn’t sure, and that was making him restless. Could he be selfish and let the public believe it had been some sort of miracle?

Only the arrival of his friends managed to break that spiralling chain of thoughts. A blessing, if
“I collected notes and homework from all your classes of the day,” was the first thing Hermione said when she walked in at the front of the small group coming in after classes had ended and before dinner.

“It’s nice to see you too, Hermione,” Harry answered, grinning, while he checked who had come. He was pretty sure that Madam Pomfrey had restricted the number of people who could visit him at one time, as well as the time they could stay. She had threatened to do that, and Harry knew she always kept her word. “How long can you stay?”

“Half an hour,” was Theo’s answer as he dragged the one visitor’s chair over, while Luna closed the door behind them.

“The others wanted to come too, but Madam Pomfrey said not more than three at a time. You’ll get a lot of visitors,” Luna said in her dreamy way before she sat down right next to Harry on his bed.

“I can use every distraction I can get,” Harry said with feeling, taking Luna’s hand into his, glad that she had come.

“That’s why I brought your homework. You can’t exactly practice here, but you can study the theory and write your essays.” With a dull sound she placed a bag on his bedside table, probably filled with books and writing implements. “You need to keep up with the work so you’ll not fall behind so shortly before the OWLs.”

“And to make sure that you get to do something fun, I asked Professor Snape to get your art supplies from your room,” Theo said, picking up a small satchel, and placing it on Harry’s legs. “I hope he found everything you need. It’s not easy to ask him for something like that.” Theo shuddered theatrically, making Luna and Harry laugh, while Hermione made a face.

“So what are the rumours?” The Hogwarts rumour mill was one of the fastest Harry had ever seen. Not even Little Whinging had been that fast on the trading of half-truths and judgement.

“About the identity of the terrorist, or about the shield?” Theo asked, settling back down in the visitor chair.

“Both, either.” Getting to hear a bit of gossip might help him decide what to do about the decision.

“The claims to the terrorist’s identity are all over the place,” Hermione answered, organising the books she had brought on the bedside table. “Most are not even remotely based on facts. Just over lunch one of the second-years said Professor Binns had to be the terrorist.” She shook her head, making her curls fly, clearly exasperated.

“Most in Slytherin think that it’s someone working for the Ministry or with a family member working at the Ministry. How else could they have charmed a memo to be a howler?” Theo picked up the tale.

“They didn’t listen to my information. But father is pretty sure that the Minister is trying to keep the power and sabotage Lord Slytherin with his army of heliopaths.” Sometimes Luna’s different claims were a little outlandish, and Harry could already spot that Hermione was on the verge of going on a rampage to refute that claim, so he turned to Theo and asked the first question that came to mind. “And about the shield?”

Smirking, Theo answered that one. “Some claim that Magic Herself intervened. Some claim it was
you, based on the fact that you already did the impossible by surviving the killing curse. Really ancient, forgotten wards are another popular possibility. I’m not sure what to believe. I guess the ancient wards are kind of plausible.” Theo shrugged, clearly not interested in going through all the rumours.

“Have Fred and George opened a betting pool?” The twins and Lee Jordan had opened betting pools for numerous things in the past. Maybe they had done so again.

“They haven’t,” Hermione stated, sitting down at the foot of the bed. “Ron asked after one, but they don’t think it’s likely that we’ll get a definitive answer to the current questions. And with the number of injured people, the danger for more, they thought it a bad idea to bet on it. I hadn’t thought them that sensible.”

“Now you’re being mean, Hermione. Fred and George have clear boundaries. Just because you disapprove of their tendency to prank people, you can’t claim them to be insensible or unintelligent. Their work is innovative!” Harry really was unhappy at how many people looked down on the twins because they applied their creativity and knowledge to develop pranks. Their mother, one of their older brothers, people like Hermione, and, Harry was pretty sure, quite a few of their professors.

“I’m not mean,” Hermione insisted. “They could accomplish so many meaningful things with their knowledge and creativity, their ability to think outside the box. But they concentrate all of that talent on useless pranks.” She threw up her hands, her voice rising the longer she was speaking.

The discussion escalated from there, as Theo watched with an amused smirk on his face, while Luna got out a small book of poems from her pocket, seemingly ignoring them all.

The discussion only ended when Madam Pomfrey came in to remind them that the allotted time of thirty minutes was over. “Mr. Slytherin, you need rest and quiet. Not all the commotion visitors bring.”

“But I’m restless!” Harry insisted while his friends vanished, waving, out of the door to his private room.

“You don’t need to sleep, Mr. Slytherin. But you will not leave your bed!” She put emphasis on her words with chopping hand motions. And Harry found himself nodding in agreement before her vehemence had fully registered.

“Can you leave the door open? I would like to sketch the room.” Harry felt like cringing because what had been meant to be a statement came out like a question.

“I can do that,” Madam Pomfrey agreed with a nod, and strode out of the room only moments later, her prim shoes making clicking sounds on the polished floor.

Harry reached for the satchel Theo had brought and got out his sketchpad and the charcoal pieces he used, before settling back against the headboard until he found the perfect angle to get an interesting sketch of the infirmary beyond the door to his private room. Then he started sketching, the charcoal moving smoothly over the paper.

ooOoo
The useless brats once again had managed to damage one of the precious portraits in the castle, and now he had cut himself on the sharp edge of the damaged frame.

In a more-than-grumpy mood, Argus walked into the infirmary to let Madam Pomfrey look at the cut. He probably would have to wait long, with that many small brats staying here because of the injuries they had obtained at the village on Saturday.

While he searched for Madam Pomfrey, or a place to sit down, Argus noticed that one of the doors to the private rooms at the back of the hospital wing was open, revealing a slight figure sitting on the bed.

Was that the brat Lord Slytherin had adopted? And was he using a sketchpad? How interesting.

It always had offended him that Hogwarts did not have even one art-related subject on offer for the students who were artistically inclined. It looked like that one was dedicated enough to work on some art outside of classes and motivation stemming from them.

“Argus, why are you here?”

He turned to see Madam Pomfrey standing behind him, a questioning look on her face. “I cut myself. I don’t want to get any blood on my work. Could you possibly heal it?” It was so frustrating to always have to ask for help from others when he needed some magic done.

“Certainly. Please follow me into my office.” And she was gone. With a sigh Argus followed the matron into her office to get the cut cleaned and healed so he could get back to repairing the damage done to the poor painting.

Sometimes he really wished those brats had some respect for art.

oooOOooo

Tuesday, 23rd of April 1996

One of the big conference rooms at the Ministry was quickly filling with people. Amelia was here as the representative of the Law Enforcement, together with the Aurors who had searched the scene and had been working on the whole case for longer. She was tired. The whole situation reminded her too much of the time just after Voldemort’s fall during the Death Eater trials. Too much too do in too little time with too few people.

She had a feeling that this big meeting had the potential to go bad really quickly.

“Alright! Listen, everyone!” Cornelius called five minutes after the meeting should have started and before everyone who had been invited had arrived.

It took another few moments before everyone had settled down and the Minister – as short as he was – finally could be seen from all corners of the room.

“We’re here today to map out our plan of action on how to best use the Ministry’s resources to finally find and arrest the Howler Terrorist.” Amelia made a face at that sensationalist, if accurate,
nickname the Prophet had coined for the perpetrator. “Aurors Tonks, Dawlish, and Shacklebolt have been investigating the scene of the latest crime. You’ll find a copy of the information in front of you.” Amelia already had read the file, so she didn’t open it as all the others did in just that moment.

“Auror Tonks, please present the information we have at the moment, and where you think more resources can be applied to the best effect.” Cornelius waved at the young woman – who had been hesitant to speak before all those people at first – giving the floor to her. Tonks stood and started to give a succinct report. “We know that the person we are looking for is male. He creates his own howler supplies and probably has his own garden to grow some of the ingredients. We don’t currently know where he gets the birds from. Judging by the targets before Hogsmeade, it seems that he holds a grudge against Lord Slytherin and how the magical community has handled the whole situation.” She waved a hand to indicate the Wizengamot and its decision, the frenzy among the high society over getting to know the man, the adoption of the Boy-Who-Lived, and everything else. “We currently assume that he has no children at the school old enough to be allowed to go to Hogsmeade, or is the parent of one of those children who stayed at the castle.” Tonks stopped for a short moment, taking a breath. “We also suspect that the perpetrator either works at the Ministry, or has a family member, or close friend, working here. Everything else is conjecture.”

The witch currently sporting curly, bright yellow hair, took a sip from a glass of water before continuing. “We could use help in testing the scraps of the partially burned parchment pieces and the one complete howler we have from the attack on the Minister’s office. We also should investigate the way all those birds were obtained. Furthermore, we should take into account how much time it takes to create all those howlers. I think those are the most pressing and promising avenues of investigation.”

“But what’s with the shield?” Croaker spoke up, causing a murmur to go around the room. “Don’t you think that’s an interesting phenomenon in need of investigation?”

Amelia rolled her eyes and concentrated on the young Auror, interested to see how she would handle a senior employee derailing an important meeting like that.

“With all due respect, Sir, but the shield most likely wasn’t created by the man we are searching for. While knowing the cause or origin of it certainly is interesting, it will not help us catch the perpetrator. And seeing the way the attacks have escalated, we need to hurry. Otherwise we possibly will have to face many deaths.” Amelia felt like standing up and clapping. It always was a delight to see one of the self-important wizards put in their place. Especially when a young witch was the one doing it.

Croaker nodded, and refrained from commenting further.

Cornelius clapped once, drawing all attention back to him. “Thank you, Auror Tonks. I want a list of all Ministry employees who have been on holiday or ill in the last weeks. Let’s remove them from the list of suspects.” Which was a political way to say that they were the prime suspects and a good place to start.

After that the meeting dissolved into bickering over who was to do what, which department had which authority in this and which projects or normal duties could be neglected to further the investigation. They didn’t even break for lunch, and Amelia was sure this would resemble the days of the last war too much for her comfort.

oooOOooo
Staying in the hospital wing to be monitored for magical exhaustion was the most boring thing Harry had experienced in a while.

Sure, he had stayed here for the same thing back in his first year, but back then he had slept most of the time. But this time he was awake. And bored out of his mind.

Without distractions during the day, his homework and reading had been easy to do, and even though Hermione probably would make sure he got the work from today, it would not last long.

Moving to get a good look out of the window, Harry set everything up to make a sketch – his second attempt – from the view out of the window.

“Sketching again?” A voice from behind Harry asked, making him turn to have a look.

“Ron!” There right in the doorway stood Ron, looking relaxed, but tired, a chess set under his arm. “So you’re part of today’s group of visitors?” Harry asked, feeling a little pathetic for his enthusiasm, which he hoped didn’t show too much.

“That I am,” Ron agreed. “We thought to... mix it up would be a good idea.” With that explanation, the red-head walked into the room, making room for Neville and Ginny to come in as well.

“I have your assignments,” Neville said, moving one of the now three visitor chairs – Madam Pomfrey had provided two more when she had announced that Harry would have to stay the rest of the week – a little before sitting down. “Hermione was most insistent that you should get the information so you’ll be able to keep up.” Neville rolled his eyes and they all chuckled.

“I hope she won’t be such a terror next year when I’m taking my OWLs,” Ginny said with feeling, settling in the chair Ron had been about to take, making her brother roll his eyes at her.

“We could try to distract her.” Harry suggested, grinning. Visitors were a good way to stave off the boredom.

“Not gonna work,” Ron declared, dragging the remaining chair over to Harry’s bed, and placing the chess set down on the bed. “Want to play?”

“Sure!” Harry agreed and placed his drawing supplies down on the floor under the bed, where they would be out of the way.

Once the pieces were set up, and Neville and Ginny were deep in a conversation about Ginny’s latest Herbology homework, Ron almost whispered a question Harry realized had been on his mind since Saturday. “How did you do it?”

Not looking up from the board, pretending to contemplate his next move, Harry asked feeling apprehensive, “How did I do what?”

“The shield,” Ron said, annoyed. “It came out of your wand after you hissed something. I was near enough to see that. As did Neville. We talked, and decided to keep our mouths shut until we could speak with you.”

Harry huffed. Great. He guessed that he should have realised that his two friends would have seen what he had done. Luna had seen too, and just today over lunch had promised him that she wouldn’t speak with anyone if he wanted to avoid the publicity. But would Ron do the same? He really wasn’t the best at keeping secrets. Or maybe just when he thought it was something great
“Thanks for that.” Harry settled on starting with. “I don’t want it to become public that the shield was created by me.” And didn’t that still feel wired? Knowing that he had done something that big? “Father agrees that it might be more trouble than it’s worth, because we would have to explain, and people might think me a danger again.”

Ron made a confused face, echoed in his question just as Harry knew it would be. “Why?”

Harry looked between his three friends and weighed what he even could say. “It’s magic based on Parseltongue. It’s family magic. I can’t tell you all that much about what is and what’s not possible.” Ginny and Neville weren’t talking any longer, and Harry was pretty sure they were listening in as well. “Let’s just say that it’s not like the spells we learn here in school. Much more basic in structure. A lot can go wrong if you don’t think things through… so I actually expected a longer lecture about me simply using this to protect a village…” Harry trailed off, looking down on the chessboard, not sure he wanted to see the looks on the others’ faces.

“So you're trying to say this wasn’t an actual spell, but more along the lines of winging it?” Ginny sounded incredulous, demanding he tell her that she had understood that wrong.

“Pretty much,” Harry nodded without looking up. “Father and I had discussed options on how I could protect Marcus if it ever was needed, and I had asked him about this method… he hadn’t looked into it much. Easier, straightforward stuff is much safer. But we discussed how it might work. And that’s what I remembered.” It wasn’t exactly how this had gone – Harry had specifically asked for protection and defence with Parselmagic – but it was close enough and probably better to grasp for his friends.

“That sounds really dangerous!” Neville almost whispered, making Harry look up at his friend’s horrified tone, getting to see a wide-eyed looking Neville, and two redheads with freckles standing out on their pale faces.

“I did end up in the hospital for a whole week,” Harry pointed out with a deadpan voice and look. “That’s why Father insisted I only ever try stuff I talked over with him first and never without adult supervision.” Harry was pretty sure knowing that would get Hermione on board at least. She was all for responsible actions, and the research into new and exciting things.

“And you don’t want it known because it’s dangerous and people will bend this out of proportion?” Ron asked, brow furrowed in thought.

“Exactly. You remember the articles about Hermione, Krum, and me being in a love triangle?” And just thinking about that whole mess made his skin crawl. That had been terribly awful.

“Can we tell Hermione?” Ron asked, a bit of colour returning to his face. “It would be terrible keeping that from her.”

“Just make sure no one listens in and she knows why I want it to be kept from the public.” Harry agreed, because it would be terrible to keep this from Hermione, who was just as much his friend as Ron.

“Great,” was the last thing said to that, and they all went back to what they had been doing before. Neville giving Ginny some tutoring in Herbology, Ron and Harry playing a game of chess.

It was pretty clear really fast that Harry was going to lose once again. Maybe he should start practising more. If Marcus’ fascination with the big chess pieces was anything to go by, if Harry
didn’t want to lose to his younger brother all the time in a few years, he needed to get better.

Wednesday, 24th of April 1996

Severus was bone-tired. He had been up brewing when he had not been assisting Madame Pomfrey
in the infirmary, Minerva with organising the living places for all the people from Hogsmeade
searching for a safe space at Hogwarts, or teaching. He was a professor besides everything else he
had to do.

As Sonja couldn’t handle most of the ingredients any longer Severus had had his NEWT classes
assist. But that only helped so much.

And now he was here, in his best robes with the Prince coat of arms embroidered in painstaking
detail, waiting for the regular Wizengamot meeting of the month of April to start. He really would
rather have been in bed, but sadly this was one of his duties, and an order from his Lord as well.

At least he got out of teaching his classes for the day that way. He had set them a research project
in the library instead. Which would result in more inane drivel for him to read. Not exactly a
perfect trade-off.

But he would be an idiot if he expected a fair trade in this world of politics he had more or less
stumbled into.

The mood in the Ministry was tense. Everyone Severus had met on the way down had had definite
signs of people who weren't getting enough sleep. This search for the terrorist was taking a toll on
everyone.

“Attention! Attention!” the Chief Warlock called out, getting an almost instant reaction, which was
unusual as far as Severus could tell. Everyone settled down on their seats pretty quickly, and a hush
fell over the room.

The sombre mood had reached even these usually petty wizards and witches, it seemed.

“In the light of recent events, this session will be a shorter regular one, followed by an emergency
session about the terrorist currently threatening our community as a whole. Are there any
objections to this, or any remarks someone might want to make before we start?” No one raised
their wand, so the Chief Warlock got on with the usual preliminary things done at the start of all
regular meetings, which Severus blended out in favour of calming himself down with the use of his
Occlumency barriers. His Lord had decided – together with the other, older Lords – that Severus
was the best man to argue their point on the amendment to some outlawed medical practices.
Severus wasn’t exactly a stranger to speaking in public, but this was something new. He never had
had to argue politics in so public a fashion, or with quite as many possible consequences.

“As no one has any announcements to make, let’s proceed with the proposed amendment to the list
of banned rituals brought forward by Lord Prince and Lord Nott. Gentlemen.” He waved at them
both and Severus stood as had been the plan.
Giving a bow to the Chief Warlock, Severus began, "Thank you, Chief Warlock. In the past, quite a few rituals were banned because of their unpredictable nature and the dangers they could cause. While some are rightly banned for various reasons," and wasn’t that the honest truth? Thinking of some of the things he had read over the years, a cold feeling ran down his back, “More than a few useful rituals, perfectly safe to perform by a witch or wizard proficient in them, were banned as well. Sometimes over a technicality, such as sharing one element of their design with one of the truly dangerous ones.” Severus took a calming breath and tried to include everyone listening, his gaze wandering around the chamber. This was kind of similar to, and at the same time totally different from, lecturing to teenagers.

“Our amendment aims to strike those healing rituals from the list of banned rituals which are still practiced widely in the wizarding world outside of Britain, and even still technically allowed to be performed here. Witches and wizards have suffered, and died, needlessly because the last remaining healers able to perform those quick and efficient rituals here on our island, are too old or overworked to attend all the cases needing their help. Let’s remove the ban from teaching them to young, eager healers ready to pick up the mantle to serve our community before we are dependent on healers from the continent or even places much farther away.”

Looking around, Severus was pretty sure he had captured the interest of more than a few of the more neutral members and even of quite a few who had in the past mostly blindly followed Dumbledore in his beliefs.

“You all have been informed prior to this meeting about the list of rituals proposed to be removed from the list of banned rituals, and a text listing the reasons for each of them,” The Chief Warlock explained after Severus had sat down to signal the end of his small speech, which they had polished in a group effort over tea. He never had appreciated how much politics was done over tea and crumpets.

“Is there a member of this illustrious body with a counter argument?” was the next question by the Chief Warlock while he turned a small hourglass with a flick of his wand. While the sand literally ran out, they all waited the customary few minutes for someone to stand and ask to be heard. It was an odd little custom in Severus’ eyes, but tradition was important. Even the silly ones.

But they had done their work, getting respected healers to write up the list and the reasons, and had chosen the best time – even without knowing that the terrorist would distract everyone, in addition to the tragic death of one of their number making the Lords and Ladies more aware of their own mortality – so everyone stayed seated.

The following vote went quickly and brought an overwhelming number of votes in favour, with more abstained votes than actual nays.

A stone gavel hit the disk designed for it. “Accepted with over two-thirds of the votes.” The Chief Warlock quickly checked over the points on the agenda handed to him by one of the clerks before banging the gavel again. “That concludes our regular April session. Let’s move on to the emergency session and a request of the Minister. Minister.”

Given the leave to speak, Fudge, in those robes of violent plum, stood and started to speak.

Resisting the urge to rub at his burning eyes, Severus settled in to listen.

ooOoo
Marvolo was listening to Cornelius giving his reasoning for a search of all offices, as well as private desks, in the Ministry, as well as a broad application of the fingerprint charm, in the search for the terrorist when he noticed something out of the corner of his eyes.

It wasn’t really unusual for clerks or junior members to move between the rows during a session, or some member taking a short break for one reason or another – not everyone could wait for one of the regular breaks for a run to the bathroom – but it was unusual for a Department representative to walk between the seats themselves.

Amos Diggory was walking between the first and second tier of seats holding a scroll of parchment in his hand as if he was about to deliver it to one of the people sitting in their seats, listening to the Minister laying out a tentative plan that needed their approval to go forward.

It wasn’t unknown for important messages to be in need of delivery during a session, but usually it was brought in by an aide, and Marvolo was pretty sure no one had entered the chamber since before the Chief Warlock had started to speak.

Diggory was pretty close by now, and something in the man’s eyes set Marvolo’s teeth on edge. It took a while, and then Marvolo made the connection.

That was the manic glint he had seen in a young Bella’s eyes. The senseless need for destruction that Fenrir and McNair had sported more than once in the past.

Diggory drew level with the edge of the silver Slytherin seat, seemingly intending to walk past it, but the knuckles of his hand were white, as if he were gripping onto something.

“The Aurors have worked out the people matching closest to the list of hints we have to the perpetrator. I ask for the Wizengamot’s approval to start the investigation today…”

Marvolo didn’t catch what Cornelius was saying after that as he threw himself out of the seat to the floor, just barely dodging a sharp silver blade – a potions knife most likely – wielded by Amos Diggory with deadly determination.

He had no time to get his wand into his hand from where it was securely stored in the holster on his arm, as he rolled backwards to avoid another swing of the knife from Diggory, who was bending over the bench, one hand used to steady himself.

Knowing that he would pay later for these acrobatics – maybe he needed to get back into yoga to retain his flexibility – Marvolo managed to get to his feet, narrowly avoiding to bumping into one of the scribes, frantically trying to collect the notes, forms, scrolls, and what-not from the table and make it out of the chamber.

Someone let out a high-pitched scream – perhaps one of the Ladies – and Marvolo finally managed to get out his wand, reminding himself that he could not in fact use any strong curses here in front of all those witnesses.

Diggory didn’t say a thing, but let the knife fall to the floor, probably concluding that he wouldn’t manage to get close enough to Marvolo again to use it. Instead his grin got even more manic, and one hand vanished into a pocket of his plum-coloured robes.

Marvolo was jostled by more people getting frantic in their panic, trying to flee the room and not having any idea how to stay out of Marvolo’s way.
So Marvolo resorted to stunners, silently trying to cast them at Diggory who frustratingly managed to dodge the first two red streaks of magic, using Marvolo’s reluctance to harm bystanders against him.

It was more than frustrating to have scruples, but that didn’t change the fact that he suddenly seemed to have them.

Diggory threw a handful of small balls at Marvolo, and not knowing what exactly they were, Marvolo cast a quick shield able to hold off physical objects.

They fell to the floor and instantly started to burn, creating an obnoxious cloud of dark fumes.

Not willing to take any changes, Marvolo cast a bubblehead charm at himself first, then cast a small version of the shield he had used to repel the projectiles over them on the floor.

Around them people were stumbling over themselves and others, shouting and screaming, and generally not being very helpful.

Not willing to wait for his followers to get their act together, Marvolo snarled and hoisted himself up into the air with a flex of his magic and will. He needed to get out of the cramped quarters between the benches, and away from people getting in the way. The ceiling of this chamber was high enough for him to hover, if not for gaining any speed. But it would have to do.

Diggory now was flinging spells in all directions, indifferent to whom he might hit. Small fires started where he hit flammable material. And people trying to incapacitate him were adding to the pandemonium.

Pondering if they might need to arrange something like a fire drill, and cursing his own mind for making useless observations at a moment like this, Marvolo cast a spell he knew well and had used during the last few training duels he had participated in. It was one he had found in South America, and which conjured and flung a bola each time it was cast. As physical damage usually was easily healed, Marvolo hoped it was a safe choice and would catch the madman by surprise.

The first bola crashed into a bench made from some soft wood, causing splinters to spray away from it, making a part of Marvolo cringe at the damage to a part of their history. The second managed to fell an elder witch Diggory had shoved behind him, while trying to get away to one of the alcoves around the edge of the chamber.

Finally a bola wrapped around Diggory’s arms, binding them to his torso and managing to disrupt his balance enough that he fell, face first, to the floor, clipping a bench from dark stone – granite, maybe – with his head.

Carefully manoeuvring in the air to get a clear shot at the temporarily incapacitated wizard, Marvolo took aim and cast a strong Incarcerous, before landing with a light step on the bench he had harmed.

Before he could cast a reparo at the bench – would that even be wise? – Severus was by his side, and a few Aurors were entering the chamber at a run.

“Lord Slytherin, if you would allow, let be cast a diagnostic on you.” Severus was polite as ever, and quite accurately had adapted the address for his Lord to the occasion.

“Why?” Marvolo was puzzled. He hadn’t inhaled any of the fumes, and Diggory hadn’t even cast one spell at him.
“I assume you may have been hit with the knife. There seems to be a cut in the sleeve of your robe.” Severus pointed out, holding his wand made from dark wood in a loose grip most often seen in serious duellists.

“There is?” Marvolo moved his right arm to get a better look at his sleeve, and indeed found a clean cut almost the length of his forearm. “You seem to be right, Lord Prince.” And he hadn’t even noticed that the knife had come so close to cutting him.

Just then he noticed that the fabric of his robe right next to the cut seemed to be wet. A lightheadedness came over him, and with dawning horror Marvolo realized that there might have been method to the madness of the seemingly ill planned attack. And over the screams of Amos Diggory – “He killed my son! The monster! He’s getting what he deserves!” – Marvolo felt himself losing consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

I know by now it was kind of obvious who the terrorist might be. And this is a rather mean place to stop… but, well, it rather fit ;) *evilgrin*

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Aftermath

Chapter Notes

Got some good ideas and interesting questions from so many of you in comments and reviews on the last chapter. Thanks for that! Special thanks to graynavarre (and julesa66) for making me think about Occlumency and magical exhaustion. You’ll see! On with the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wednesday, 24th of April 1996

With a yelp of surprise and panic, Harry sat up in his bed in the hospital wing. He often slept for short times during the day. One of the reasons that he didn’t put up much of a fight against being forced to stay in bed till the end of the week.

But now his heart was racing, as if he had had a nightmare, and he had a distinctly uneasy feeling. Like something bad was about to happen.

Or had happened.

It wasn’t even lunch yet, so Harry closed his history book – one of those books almost guaranteed to send him to sleep at the moment – placed it on the nightstand, and got out his mirror to call his father. Wizengamot session be damned, he needed to check in with Marvolo to make sure he was well.

ooOoo

The first thing Marvolo noticed was that he was cold. Then he felt the hard surface he was probably lying on, and heard a lot of people around him.

Slowly blinking, Marvolo moved to sit up, but was prevented from doing that by a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Stay down, please, Lord Slytherin.” That was Severus. Marvolo moved his eyes until they landed on the pale face of the Potions Master. “There was poison on the blade, and until we know what that poison was, the bezoar is just a stopgap measure. Not a solution. So please keep your heart rate slow and avoid moving too much.”

A bezoar would neatly explain the rather disgusting taste filling his mouth. So Marvolo did as instructed, easing back and relaxing on the bench. “He’s secured?”

“That he is,” Severus answered, looking over to another point in the chamber, prompting Marvolo to turn his head in that direction as well, just in time to see how a struggling and screaming – if
silenced – Amos Diggory being dragged to the edge of the room by a pair of Aurors.

At least one problem taken care of.

“Lord Prince?” Marvolo could just see the auror robes appear behind Severus as he turned to look up to the person coming to a halt behind him. “We have taken pictures and samples from the blade, and did cast the fingerprint charm. Madame Bones said to give it to you as the best expert in identifying poisons on site. She also said you’re welcome to use the laboratory of the Auror Department.”

There was a quick flash of colourful light – maybe some kind of stasis charm – before Severus started to speak again. “Fetch Lord Lestrange, please.” Sounded as if Severus was intent on playing the mother hen.

“Did you notice any symptoms, Lord Slytherin?” Severus asked next, once again crouching next to the bench that was Marvolo’s resting place.

“No.” Marvolo answered, carefully shaking his head. “Not until the fight was over and I passed out. But I didn’t even notice that I didn’t manage to dodge the knife completely. So I don’t think I can give a helpful answer.” There was some elaborate plasterwork on the ceiling, which Marvolo hadn’t noticed until now, and delicate swirls of colour. What a change in perspective could make visible. Amazing. “But my concentration seems to be suffering.” Why else would he be musing over plasterwork and paint?

“I’ll analyse the poison quickly then.” Severus stood and made room for another wizard, who bent so that Marvolo could look up at him from where he was still working on keeping calm. “I’ll inform Healer Greengrass. Keep an eye on him, please, Lord Lestrange.” And Severus was gone.

“Hello, Xerxes.” Hopefully Severus would work quickly. Staying here was kind of embarrassing.

“Hello, Marvolo. Why is your robe vibrating?” For a moment Marvolo wasn’t sure what Xerxes was talking about, then he noticed that someone must have gotten him out of his robe before cleaning the shallow cut in his arm. The robe now was hanging towards the floor just off the edge of the bench.

“There’s a communication mirror in the pocket. If it’s vibrating, Harry is trying to contact me,” Marvolo explained and watched as his friend got the mirror out of the pocket and handed it over. Marvolo carefully accepted it with his uninjured hand, and then accepted the call to the frantic-looking face of his older son. “Harry, is everything alright?”

Harry looked taken aback. “I called to ask you. I just woke up… did something happen?” The last question came out more like an accusation and Marvolo had to smile at the resemblance to how Nagini would sometimes ask him if he had done something reckless.

“There was a light scuffle here at the Ministry, all sorted by now, so no need to worry,” Marvolo answered, using a tone that he knew wouldn’t convince his son. He was pretty confident that all would be well – Severus was really quick on his antidotes – and bantering with his son was a good way to pass the time.

But why had Harry dreamed something disturbing now? There hadn’t been any bleed-over in ages. Harry’s look was more than sceptical, and his eyes moved over Marvolo’s face, clearly assessing the situation as best as he could through the mirror. “Are you lying down?”
“I am. Healer’s orders. Or rather, Severus’ order. I’m stable, but he insists I stay here until a healer has looked at me.” He had promised not to lie, but he didn’t want to worry his son either.

“I’ll tell on you to Nagini. But I’m sure she’ll know on her own anyway.” Harry said with narrowed eyes, before they got bigger than should be allowed – his godfather probably had taught him the puppy eyes – and he pleaded. “Be careful and listen to the healer. Will you?”

“Of course,” Marvolo tried to assure his son.

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t go against the healer’s orders,” Xerxes said from his side, smirking down at Marvolo, who glared half-heartedly up at his friend.

“That’s too kind of you, Lord Lestrange,” was Harry’s response to that. “I’ll go back to resting then, as those are my orders from the healer as well.”

They ended the call, and Marvolo could once again contemplate the ceiling. Harry’s words about his own healer’s orders had reminded Marvolo that his son was recovering from a severe case of magical exhaustion. And for that reason his son’s Occlumency shields were practically worthless at the moment. And while he had been unconscious some of his feelings must have leaked through. Probably. Maybe.

He would think more about it when he felt less fuzzy.

“I think I see Malcolm and Severus at the door,” Xerxes said some time later, drawing Marvolo’s attention in that direction. “You probably can get up soon, my friend.”

Marvolo really hoped that would be the case.

ooOoo

In a different part of the Wizengamot Chamber, Amelia Bones watched Lord Prince walking back purposefully into the chamber, carrying something carefully in his hands, judging by the way he was moving.

She glanced over to where Marvolo was resting under the supervision of Lord Lestrange. The fact that they had gone to school together – kind of – seemed to have helped mend the relationship even after the two sons who had become Death Eaters had died. At least every interaction Amelia had witnessed since Marvolo had claimed his seat on the Wizengamot had seemed like a steady movement to an amicable relationship.

Reassured that her friend was safe and probably soon on the way to complete recovery, Amelia turned briefly to where Cornelius was intently listening to complaints by a few of the Wizengamot members who had gotten bruised during the scuffle.

“Please speak with the scribe. He’ll take all your complaints and write them down. That way no one will be overlooked, and everything will be taken care of,” was all she heard of what Cornelius was saying to placate the agitated members, effectively restoring order among the politicians.

Leaving him to that part of the aftermath, Amelia quickly made her way over to where two of her Aurors were trying to wrestle Amos Diggory into a pair of cuffs. Trying being the operative word.
Rolling her eyes at the lack of practical skills some of the Aurors had – just like the silly disdain for spells perceived as too *simple* – Amelia walked over there and once within earshot of them demanded to know what was going on. “Is there a reason you only have silenced him and didn’t use a stunner?”

“Madame…” The one Auror holding the cuffs fumbled for words, clearly embarrassed to not have thought of that solution.

Seeing as neither of them had a hand free for their wand – and why were there only two of them? – Amelia shot off a stunner at Amos, before placing her wand back into her holster. The man went limp and gravity took over, making Amos slide downwards, almost toppling the Auror trying to steady him, now that he was no longer struggling.

“Take him to the high-security holding cell. Search him thoroughly. No! Change him into different clothes, make sure he hasn’t anything to harm himself with. And there have to be at least two guards at the cell at all times.” They couldn’t take the chance that he would try to kill himself before they could question him. The way he had acted today indicated that his own well-being wasn’t a priority for him any longer. “And no visitors without my expressed approval! Understood?”

“Yes, Ma'am!” they both said, standing at attention, Amos now on the floor, his hands bound behind his back.

With that taken care of – she had a feeling that she should check on the cells to see if her orders were being followed – Amelia walked over to where a small group had gathered around the seat where Marvolo had collapsed after he had incapacitated Amos.

Once she reached the group of wizards, Lucius Malfoy was the first to notice her presence and stepped aside so she could see Marvolo sitting there, looking slightly ruffled and pale, monitored by the younger Greengrass brother.

“You were lucky, Lord Slytherin,” said the Healer as Amelia stepped into the circle. “If what Master Snape says about the poison is correct, it should have been instantly lethal if brewed right.”

“I’m pretty confident in my results.” And there was the level of sarcastic disdain Amelia was expecting to hear from Severus Snape ever since they'd had to ask him for his expertise on an experimental potion in a case where the widow had claimed murder. “You can thank Mr. Diggory’s abysmal brewing technique for your continued wellbeing, Lord Slytherin.”

“And your tendency to be over-prepared, Lord Prince,” Marvolo stated with a tired smile. “The quick administration of a bezoar certainly had an effect as well.”

“It most certainly had,” Greengrass agreed, not letting Snape diminish his part in the lucky averting of a bad outcome.

Amelia smiled, and got a small smirk from Marvolo in return. “The way you’re standing here, gentlemen, is not in the least subtle. And with most of you having been in Slytherin at that!” Her comment got a weak chuckle out of Marvolo, while the others looked like a bunch of schoolchildren caught out after curfew at the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

“Amelia, you have to admit, when we can be friends, then there’s no reason to think others who were wronged in the past can’t give me a new chance as well. Don’t you think?” She rolled her eyes at Marvolo, but smiled. He had a point, after all.
She pointed her finger at him. “You rest, and listen to your healer. I’ll inform you when we need your testimony. And I want to know where you learned that spell. I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“South America. And I’ll teach it to you when next we have time,” Marvolo promised, and then went back to enduring being fussied over by his healer.

With a bracing breath, Amelia went back to managing the madness that was an assassination attempt within the Wizengamot Chamber. That hadn’t happened in at least a hundred years. Probably. She would have to look that up. But later.

oooOOooo

Marvolo was really not sure if he should be amused or exasperated.

Currently he was sitting in one of the armchairs in the family drawing room, almost buried under his own familiar.

.:Next time you go out there you will take me with you:. she ranted at him, carefully inspecting each inch of him with her flickering tongue. .:What is it with you two leggers that you can’t protect yourself?:.

Carefully shielding his nose from her tongue – that tickled – Marvolo protested against that .:I’m perfectly capable of defending myself, Nagini:. Her weight shifted and her face now was near his ear, checking that he wasn’t hurt .:You know that I can fight off dangers:.

Nagini huffed, and suddenly moved to the floor, slithering over to the rug in front of the fireplace. .:You need someone to help you. You can’t see all that happens around you:. That was something Nagini brought up from time to time. The fact that his eyes were not able to give him a 360° panorama view of his surroundings, which she considered of as a major disadvantage.

.:I had allies with me, Nagini. And I was able to concentrate because I knew that you were here, keeping an eye on Marcus:. It wasn’t really the truth, as Marvolo hadn’t thought about Marcus at all in that moment, and the child had been at school. But that she would protect his children was something Marvolo was sure about.

.:I could be a more effective guard, if I was allowed to go with you, or the bubbly hatchling:. Nagini hissed petulantly from her place in front of the fire, still working on attaining the perfect position, sliding over herself in an intricate knot.

.:We have talked about that. You don’t like the cold, and all the other children at the school are going to annoy you. I’ll take you with me whenever I’m not going to be in the Wizengamot. Familiars aren’t allowed in there:. And they weren’t, ever since some owl had made a racket in there, or something.

Marvolo stood, sorted out his robes with a small flicker of magic, and went to get a book out from the shelves. He needed a break, and now that Marcus was asleep and his daily talk with Harry was done as well, he would read a good book before going to bed.

The next few days would be hard as well. The press was sure to make an appearance, asking
questions, and the Aurors probably would have questions.

With a sigh Marvolo let himself fall into the armchair, opened the book, and started reading about old wards used to protect the city of Rome from fire during the time of the republic.

oooOOooo

Thursday, 25th of April 1996

Standing here as his Lord’s ears and eyes in the investigation was kind of scary. John knew how important this was, even more important than his normal work, but until now he never had had the dubious honour of standing next to Amelia Bones while doing his work as a Death Eater.

They all were standing, or sitting – depending on temperament, and he guessed, the day they had already had – in a room that provided them with a prime view into the interrogation room by the use of an enchanted mirror.

In that interrogation room one lone figure was waiting, chained to a sturdy chair, seemingly uninterested in his surroundings. If his actions yesterday hadn’t been a big hint already, John would have guessed something with Diggory’s mind wasn’t right now watching the other wizard wait to be questioned.

Beside Amelia Bones, Kingsley and the young Tonks were here with John, all waiting for Scrimgeour to enter the interrogation room and start getting to the bottom of this whole situation. John was pretty sure all of them had an idea what had prompted the seeming descent into madness of the formerly respected wizard. They all knew of the tragic death of the man’s son at the wand of Peter Pettigrew, after all. And on top of that, the blatant and desperate seeming attack on the Dark Lord was a rather strong indicator as well.

The sound of shifting fabric ghosted through the room where they were waiting, when the door in the interrogation room opened and the Head of the Auror Division stepped inside, closing the door firmly behind himself.

“Amos,” the prisoner was greeted without getting a visible reaction. John was curious what approach the other man would use for this interrogation. From what he had heard through the office gossip from the two guards always standing outside the cell, Amos Diggory hadn’t said one coherent word since his arrest the previous day. Getting the wizard to talk wouldn’t be easy, and going about it the wrong way could make it impossible.

As if he had all the time in the world, Scrimgeour pulled out the only other chair in the room and sat down, folding his hands on the table. For a long moment neither wizard in the interrogation room moved.

“There are a lot of rumours going round the Ministry at the moment,” Scrimgeour started to speak, leaning back in his chair in a show of relaxed ease, adding to the effect of his casual drawl. “Most believe that you have gone round the bend, and that we shouldn’t bother with trying to get your reasoning, as they claim you can’t possibly have one.” John slowly nodded, feeling that the chosen approach of challenging the pride of the seemingly mad wizard would probably work well.
Diggory didn’t speak yet, but a snarl on his face clearly showed that he was affected.

“But Madame Bones insisted on proper procedure. You know how she is with those things.” Scrimgeour gave a one shoulder shrug. “So here it is for the record: Why did you do it?” The disinterest was well done in John’s humble opinion, and he watched in fascination as Diggory figuratively flew of the handle.

“Oh yeah, I know how she is. All prim and proper.” The mocking tone was strong. “Not questioning beyond the obvious! Following the letter of the law, but not its intent! And that cowardice and stupidity enabled the greatest Evil ever to get a hold on our community!” Diggory didn’t even draw breath, and John felt like taking a step back from the mad gleam in those eyes. The last time someone had had such an expression in his vicinity, crucios had been flying quick and fast. “And everyone just went along with it!” Diggory’s volume was steadily increasing. “And then the Evil managed to infect Dumbledore! Someone needed to do something! Make everyone aware of the danger!” By now Diggory was breathing heavily, and probably would have slammed his hands into the table if he had been able to move.

But he hadn’t actually admitted to any crime.

And Scrimgeour naturally had heard that lack as well. Not showing any reaction to the obvious agitation of his suspect for the exploding howlers, the Head Auror continued his needling. “Considering all the information we now have access to, and the good Lord Slytherin has done since that day in the Wizengamot, I feel that I might lose my bet that there is a shred of reasoning still left in your skull.” Scrimgeour sighed. “I guess that badly planned assassination attempt should have been enough of a hint.”

“It wasn’t badly planned!” Diggory cried in outrage. “I had everything set up as best as I could. Slipping that potion for an upset stomach to Steven so I could take his place. Brewing that poison! I even managed to cut him!” The sneer was back, and particles of spit flew through the space between interrogator and captive, as Diggory all but spat his words out. “I guess I should have known that the Evil would be impervious to poison as well! But you all are too dense to see! The howlers didn’t reach him! And now it’s too late, too late!” He dissolved into mad laughter, and then quickly into sobs, pretty much ending the interrogation then and there.

“Well that didn’t give us much,” Tonks stated in a flat tone, and they all nodded in agreement. Diggory had confessed to what they already knew. He had brewed the poison in an attempt to kill his target, because the howlers hadn’t managed to do so. But just that wasn’t a proof of his guilt, even if John was pretty sure they had the howler terrorist.

“Maybe mentioning what we found at his home will make him talk?” Tonks asked into the room, clearly unsure if it would work with someone that deranged.

“We can only hope. While the laboratory was pretty much all we’ll need to get him into Azkaban, I would prefer to know if he had help.” Madame Bones stated, before taking her leave.

The others followed soon after, making John the last to leave the observation room. He would finish the last of the paperwork he had to do, and then he would go report to his Lord. It hadn’t been exactly informative, but John was pretty sure that the Dark Lord would want to be kept informed of every little move made, every shred of information gathered, and all the observations John could provide.

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Sirius put down the last cup on the kitchen table – sure that Kreacher wouldn’t be happy with him for doing something so plebeian – before he sat down on the other side from Remus and Dora.

“It’s just such a big mess!” Dora exclaimed, her hair constantly cycling between various shades of fiery reds and oranges. “There’s Amos, who lost his son, and his wife, both grieving. And then he goes and attacks so many children!”

Both wizards kept their mouths shut, Remus adding a generous amount of fire whiskey to the tea in all their cups.

“I mean, I had my suspicions. There aren’t that many people still holding a big grudge against Lord Slytherin. And all the attacks pointed at a connection to the fact he has been given a new chance. That places he had been then had been attacked. The Minister, Harry…” Dora trailed off and picked up her cup.

Sirius couldn’t really fault Diggory for his wish for revenge. He had felt similar in the past, after all. But as what happened when he left to go after Peter, instead of staying as he should have done, had been bad, Sirius now was sure revenge wasn’t necessarily a good idea.

“I guess no one has helped them cope. Have they?” Dora said, holding her cup out for Remus to refill. “Left alone with their grief. And then the one somehow responsible for the whole mess, curse or not, gets a second chance.” She took a sip from the fresh, heavily spiked cup of tea, and gave a world-weary sigh. “I kind of understand the frustration and how unfair it must have seemed. But why go out and attack children?”

In an attempt to comfort Dora – at least Sirius thought that was the motivation – Remus placed his hand on her arm. “No one really knows what’s happening inside another’s mind, Dora. You weren’t close to him. Were you?” She just shook her head. “So how could you have known? He wouldn’t have accepted help from you. Don’t feel bad, because you couldn’t do a thing to prevent what happened.”

She didn’t seem convinced, so Sirius decided it was his duty to change the topic. A quick move brought out the newest letter from his girls from the inner pocket of his robes. “But you’re convinced that he worked alone? I would love to tell Enora and Nawel that they have no reason to worry. The news made it to the newspapers on the continent and they inquired about Harry.”

Dora’s hair settled down somewhat – staying a sunny yellow – and she gave her cousin a tentative smile. “We aren’t sure yet. But during our search of the home of the Diggorys, we didn’t find any hints that someone else was involved.” Then her smile turned into a grin, and a teasing one at that. “So your twin daughters ask after Harry? Regularly? Do you think they like him?”

Sometimes the changes in the moods of women – and Black women in particular – frightened Sirius. He furrowed his brow. Did either Nawel or Enora like Harry? “How should I know?” he finally said, shrugging. “It’s not as if a girl would talk to her father if she had a crush on a boy. Am I right?”

Dora’s grin got wider, if that was even possible. “I know that I talked to my father about crushes. Mom takes all that stuff much too seriously. She always cautioned me to not go too far, and to guard my reputation and stuff.” She rolled her eyes, and shot a sideways glance at Remus.

Now it was Sirius who grinned. “Well, I hadn’t thought that dear Andromeda still rememberd a little about the family values. But Harry is together with that sweet Lovegood girl. He’s not the
type to jump between girlfriends like that.”

Remus laughed. “He certainly is more like his father than you, Sirius. James only ever had eyes for Lily. But you! You were constantly chasing someone new.”

“And you never tried anything with anyone, Moony,” Sirius retaliated, wiggling his eyebrows. “Or did I miss something after we finished school?”

Moony rolled his eyes, and emptied his own cup of spiked tea. “You have no right to ask something like that, Padfoot.” He didn’t sound amused any longer. “It’s not as if I wanted to know what you got up to.”

Sirius snorted but had to concede the point. He had liked to brag.

“Who’s up for some dinner?” He asked his two friends, intent to fan the flames of that fledgling relationship. Remus had earned himself some happiness, and Dora clearly was set on getting Remus. Now that he had found his daughters, his days were rather empty once again. They were at school, and until the summer holidays he could only write letters. And even though that was nice, it wasn’t enough to fill his days.

Maybe he should pick up a job besides his seat on the Wizengamot as Lord Black.

But first. “Kreacher! Dinner for three, please!”

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Friday, 26th of April 1996

It had been a struggle to get Cornelius to agree that it would be best if the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was to step in front of the press. He had wanted to have this dubious honour for himself, craving the limelight. In the end, Amelia had convinced him that as the investigation was still in progress, she should answer the questions, while he could wait till the moment they concluded the investigation, or maybe even until after a trial in court, to get the attention for a finished and secure outcome.

Amelia stepped up to the podium, resisting the urge to smooth down her robes, just letting her gaze wander over the gathered press once. There were representatives from most major newspapers from all around the world present. Not something that happened all that often. But thankfully not one of the tabloids was represented. Hopefully that would result in a lack of questions regarding love interests or tragic circumstances.

“Good morning,” Amelia greeted them, effectively shutting up the last of the whisperers. “You’ll have opportunity to ask questions when I’m finished with my statement. So please wait until then.” It should be unnecessary to say this – they were professionals, after all, and certainly not at their first press conference – but better safe than sorry. Amelia could do without interruptions at the moment.

“Amos Diggory, apprehended in the Wizengamot Chamber on the 24th, has admitted to attempting to brew a deadly poison with the intent of murdering Lord Slytherin.” A great number of dicta-
quills were taking down her statement word for word, causing a background of light scratching noises. “This was thwarted by his own errors in brewing, as well as the timely administration of a bezoar by Lord Severus Prince.” Giving the sour Potions Master a spot in the international press had a kind of subtle pleasure to it. If she had asked him, he probably would have resented the idea of being presented as any kind of hero. “A thorough search of the house of the perpetrator revealed an improvised potions laboratory, clearly used for more than just the brewing of the poison used in the assassination attempt on Lord Slytherin. Mr. Diggory expressed a feeling of sympathy for the person sending exploding howlers during the interrogation. Currently we have no solid evidence that he has been the one sending those howlers. The investigation into the terrorist attacks is therefore ongoing.” She was pretty sure they had him, especially as the ingredients found in the lab had been those needed for the howler components, and the garden had been filled with everything that could be grown in this climate.

But there was no way she would say that to the international press.

“Mrs. Diggory has been found to be unaware of her husband's plans and is working together with the Auror Department to clear up the situation.” In fact she had been found almost catatonic in her home, barely managing to care for herself, so deeply lost in her grief over her lost son that she hadn’t even noticed her husband's absence. She hadn’t even known the date, and currently was residing in St. Mungo's to get her back on her feet. Hopefully.

“You may now ask your questions.”

“Sunny Sunders, New York Ghost. Madame Bones, how was it possible for a poisoned blade to make it into the Wizengamot Chambers, or even the Ministry building?” A witch in a robe cut to the newest style of dress asked, disregarding the usual flow of waiting to be called.

Taking a breath, Amelia thought, here we go, and started to explain how it wouldn’t be feasible to prevent dangerous materials from coming into the building as it was necessary to be able to bring in such for the work they were doing, and why wards to prevent certain magics from entering the Wizengamot Chamber were heavily opposed by those with a seat on the Wizengamot. This would be the opposite of fun.

Placing the last of his books in his book bag Harry wondered how many of his things had made it from his room down in the dungeons up to the infirmary. But seeing as he had stayed rather long this time, and his friends had tried to entertain him any way possible, it wasn’t all that surprising.

“I want you to go easy these first few days, Mr. Slytherin,” Madame Pomfrey said from the entrance to the private room Harry had been using. “Only theory in your revisions. If you feel anything strange, fatigue or anything else, I want to see you back here asap. Am I clear?”

“As clear as crystal, Madam Pomfrey.” For a moment Harry contemplated asking to get that in writing, to show it to Hermione in an attempt to forestall her tendency to channel her anxiety into studying.

“Well, then, get out of here,” she said with a smile, making shooing motions at him.

With a grin Harry picked up his book bag and walked out of the once again empty Infirmary. He
was the last of those people injured in the attack last week to be allowed to go. Luckily everyone else had been less severely injured.

And, Harry could hardly understand his good fortune, the fact that he had been the one to cast that shield and protect the whole village from greater harm had stayed out of the newspaper.

Not even ten steps down the hall, Harry saw Hermione and Ron walk around the corner.

“Harry!” Hermione called out, breaking into a run, the moment she saw him.

Knowing what she was about to do, Harry set his book bag down on the floor and braced himself for the impact with a grin. And just in time for the hug and the bushy hair that still hadn’t succumbed to the haircare charms Hermione had been learning from the girls she now spent more time with.

“You were so reckless. And I was so worried! But you also saved all those people, Harry. Why does something dangerous always happen around you?” She was rambling, and just loud enough that Harry could hear her where she had her mouth right next to his ear.

“I can’t explain it. But what would you have done in my place?” Harry murmured back, letting his arms fall to his sides, ending the hug between them.

To that question Hermione had no answer. Because had she been in Harry’s place, she wouldn’t have run but tried to help as well. A seemingly hopeless situation had never stopped Hermione before. And she knew that just as well as Harry did.

They stepped away from each other, Harry picked up his bag, and turned to walk further down the hallway.

“So you two are my official welcome back committee?” Harry wanted to know, looking between the not-really-happy-looking Ron – it seemed as if he wasn’t over that crush yet – and the frazzled-looking Hermione.

“Nothing so formal,” Ron rolled his eyes. “We simply volunteered to walk down together with you. Seems as if the Slytherins don’t believe you can go anywhere alone. Now that Diggory has managed to get himself caught, there’s no danger left. So why is all that security still important? Can you explain that?”

Harry’s green eyes briefly met with Hermione’s brown ones and he could see that she understood why security was still important. But Harry knew that Ron wouldn’t really accept an explanation if Hermione was to deliver it. She was much too well known for following the rules and being overly cautious for Ron to take her seriously in such a matter.

“Even if he was acting alone, and we don’t know if he did, there’s always the possibility that another person could try something. I don’t want to be subjected to a disappointed look. Would you risk getting a howler from your mother, if you could avoid it by sticking with your friends?”

Now Ron made a face, probably remembering the howler he had gotten just at the start of their second year, and nodded.

Once they reached the Great Hall – already humming with the sounds of all the students inside – Luna was there, a serene smile on her face, linking her fingers with Harry’s, going on tiptoes to give him a quick kiss. “Do you think you could make a sketch of me?”

As always slightly bemused but happy because she was so in the moment, Harry squeezed Luna’s
hand, and started to swing their linked hands. “I don’t think that I’m all that good yet with portraits yet. But if you’re offering to sit in one position for me to practice... Who am I to decline?”

“We’ll meet for breakfast then?” Luna asked, almost skipping along as they walked into the Hall and to the ends of the tables.

“We’ll do that,” Harry agreed and bent down a little to give his girlfriend a kiss. When he came back up again he met Ron’s gaze and saw his friend rolling his eyes. Maybe Harry should start a list of all the times Ron had made fun of Harry and Luna so he could give them all back once Ron started dating.

When they split to walk to their respective tables, Harry spotted Theo and Draco sitting together with most of their year mates and saving him a seat. On his way there Harry more than once felt eyes on him, but there were no whispers, and nothing of more interest than him being released from the hospital wing. If it could stay this way all through the rest of his years here at the school, Harry would be really happy.

“Harry! I’m really glad that you’re back! Practice wasn’t as effective without another seeker to compete against,” Draco stated, affecting a pompous air, making all their friends around them laugh.

Harry sat down, setting his bag onto the floor carefully – it was filled to almost bursting – picked up a plate of finely cut venison, before he even looked in Draco’s direction. When he finally did look in the blond’s direction, Draco rolled his eyes, not unsettled in the least. Harry grinned, and handed the plate over to Vincent, who held out his arm. “I’m not sure if I’m allowed to fly yet, Draco. Madam Pomfrey was insistent on me taking it easy. An hour long training session with the Quidditch team probably doesn't match that description.”

Before Draco could give a retort to that – he even had his mouth opened – Theo passed Harry a bowl of steamed carrots and spoke up. “Professor Snape will have the whole team scrubbing cauldrons if you make Harry fly without consulting Madam Pomfrey. And I would bet ten galleons that she won’t let him fly for a week yet.”

“I’m in!” Draco took the bet, and Harry turned to his food, shaking his head at his friends.

It was great being back in the common room, in front of the fire, in the armchair, surrounded by his friends. Odd how much like home these rooms now felt. He would never have guessed the first time he had been in here, back in second year.

Besides the fifth and seventh-years, almost everyone else had left for their rooms, or other parts of the castle, to avoid the frantic students preparing for their exams. Sirius had claimed that it would get worse nearer to the exams in June, remembering fondly how the Marauders once had set loose a prank in the Gryffindor common room shortly before the exams, only to be tossed out on their backsides by unimpressed housemates.

Harry had admitted that he hadn’t really noticed the heightened stress and lessened tolerance for noise of those going to take their OWLs and NEWTs in previous years. Privately he speculated that was because he and his friends had been engaged in stressful situations of their own, distracting
them from what the others were doing, but he didn’t say that out loud.

Harry got out his Potions book and the study aid he had created for plants and other potions ingredients he needed to know, dislodging a study plan Hermione had created for him. Deciding not to get up to pick it up from where it had floated down to the carpet – an old and well used one of high quality – Harry started to once again repeat the basics for both Herbology and Potions. The improved working relationship with Professor Snape, as well as the knowledge that his mother had been rather gifted in that particular subject – right up there with Charms – had breathed interest back into it for Harry. He wanted to get a good mark, maybe even good enough to continue into NEWT Potions.

Pansy scoffed, holding up the parchment with the timetable from Hermione on it. As Harry hadn’t notice her move, he assumed she had summoned the parchment. Which was quite rude, summoning something that wasn’t hers. What if it had been a private letter?

Or maybe Harry should also pay a little bit more attention to his stuff. He had to remember that espionage was an often-used tool in a politician's arsenal in the wizarding world.

“I don’t understand how you can put up with her constant pushing,” Pansy expanded on her sound of disapproval, making a face as if she had been asked to sort through a bucket of flobberworms.

“What right does she have to dictate how you should learn?”

That comment brought back the many instances of Hermione wanting to go through all the questions of an exam they just had finished and how Ron had groaned, all her nagging that they needed to finish their essays and the pang of guilt Harry had felt because he knew she was right, all the spells she had found for him to prepare for the third task just last year, the time she had searched for Nicolas Flamel, her research in defence of Buckbeak, all the times she had rolled her eyes at Ron and him when they had slacked in their homework.

He turned a little so he was facing Pansy more head on and gave her a frosty smile, summoning the parchment from her hand without picking up his wand, without conscious thought. “She has earned the right to worry about me and my academics, Pansy. She’s like an older sister to me in many ways. And while I agree that her academic focus can be trying at times, it also helped me survive more than once.” Catching the timetable which floated over – and which he had no intention to follow – Harry moved so he could sit more comfortably and went back to concentrating on his revision.

Hermione could get overwhelming in her pursuit of academics and good marks. But when he brought that up with Madame Goyle – after a rather hard homework session in the library – she had helped him understand that Hermione had problems of her own and only got this focused on homework and studying when she felt out of place or stressed. But she had also made sure that Harry understood that he had a right to set boundaries and insist that they were respected.

He planned to thank Hermione for her concern and willingness to help, but also tell her that her approach to revision wasn’t going to work for him all that well. Hopefully she wouldn’t be dejected, but understanding. She was only human and a teenager, just as Harry was.

He didn’t really notice the astonished look on Pansy’s face, or the surprise on Theo’s and Draco’s faces at his wandless summoning charm. Harry had been told to go easy, and not use magic for a few days yet, and everyone in Slytherin knew that. Seeing Harry using wandless magic after he had been in bed to recover was a startling event.

The rest of the evening passed in a concentrated atmosphere in the common room, all the boisterous activity of a Friday evening banished to the dorm rooms in a compromise to have the
whole of Saturday for not-quite activities in the shared space of the House.

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Saturday, 27th of April

Another weekend, giving the brats too much time and freedom to roam the halls and wreak havoc. Argus walked down the less-used halls of the castle, his loyal cat at his side, looking for paintings in need of cleaning, damage done to any of the priceless artefacts exhibited and not appreciated in the walkways of the school.

In a way, it was an honour to work here at Hogwarts with its high number of magical paintings. To be responsible for their care. On the other hand, he had spent years in university and later training under a master conservator in more than one museum, only to spend most of his time now mopping up dirt behind careless, snot-nosed brats to have at least something to do.

Sometimes someone would come to him asking for a portrait to be cleaned or repaired. But not many would willingly search out a squib, feeling more capable than him just because he couldn’t wield a wand and get easy results.

Argus snorted and stepped closer to a painting of a ship in rough sea, checking if he had seen a small dent in the canvas, or if it had been a trick of the light.

Then he heard voices. Two of them. A girl and a boy if he had to guess. Carefully walking along the wall – it wouldn’t do to jostle the paintings – Argus made his way over to the door to an unused classroom he was pretty sure the voices were coming from.

Mrs. Norris arrived at the door first, not making any sound but watching intently what was happening inside. When Argus finally could see inside, he was surprised at what the two of them had discovered.

That Slytherin boy was sitting there, a sketchpad on his lap, light at his back and at the other end of the room, sitting on the teacher’s desk, was a girl. She was pretty, if rather curiously decorated, for lack of a better word. She was sitting in a way that left her profile turned towards the boy sketching her, hands wrapped around her knee, and an old blanket or something draped around her.

“Are you sure that you’re still comfortable?” Mr. Slytherin asked of his model. “Please let me know if it’s not. We can stop anytime, Luna.”

The girl smiled but didn’t release her pose. “It’s fine, Harry. Keep sketching. When father and I go out to search for some of the more elusive creatures of our world, sometimes we don’t move for hours. I certainly can sit here for you a while longer.”

“As long as you’re sure,” the boy said, and went back to his sketching. His head going up and down in minute movements, when he took a look at her just before he looked back at his work.

He seemed to be really serious about his art. Spending a sunny day like this – one of those few they got in spring this far up north – inside sketching.
And now the whole getup the girl was sporting made more sense as well. The flower crown in her hair and the braids, the blanket arranged in folds around her, like a tunic, or old cloak, her bare feet. It looked like they were trying to create the basics of an ancient Greek or Roman style. Either in honour of those exact periods of time, or one of the many times later generations had found inspiration in the old imagery.

Retreating as silently as he had come, Argus contemplated what he had seen. That maybe here were the beginnings of a new artist. Not one doing quick little, animated illustrations for books, but a true artist, not using magic as a crutch. With a sad little smile Argus walked away, remembering his own time as a student, carefully sketching other students sitting, standing, posing motionless for just a pittance of money. He couldn’t hold back a snort when it suddenly occurred to him that he had been fortunate not to find Mr. Slytherin and his muse working on a nude sketch. He would have been forced to end their exploration of art in that case.

Still grinning, Mrs. Norris on his heels, Argus decided to take a look at the stonework on top of some of the castle walls, as he thought he had seen one gargoyle in need of a cleaning a few days back up there. He definitely should keep an eye out for that boy. Maybe there was someone he could nurture to follow his passion into art. Much too often, wizards and witches tried to get their children into something else.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos to everyone guessing on the poison on the blade (Willofhounds was the first!). And I do plan to expand on that scene with Argus Filch after an interesting post on Tumblr was brought to my attention several weeks back now. You might have stumbled upon it. It contemplates what skill is needed for art conservation and repair, and how Argus Filch managed to do something like that with actual slashes in a canvas in just a few days without the damage being evident after the repairs had been finished. :) Argus Filch doesn’t have many redeeming qualities, but I think we all will get to see a different side of him here.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Welcome to chapter 100! I never expected to reach this when I started, but here we are! A special thanks to everyone who read this far, whether you were here from the beginning when I started posting or found it just a short while back! I’m grateful for all your comments, the people adding the story to their favourites, subscribing, for using all tools at your disposal to let me know what you think. Your feedback has carried me this far, and I hope it’ll carry me to the end of this story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday, 28th of April 1996

“And later, Mrs. Peters will take me to visit Aiden. We’ll be allowed to fly on brooms in the garden!” Marcus sat on Marvolo’s lap, cheerfully relaying his plans for the day to his older brother. Harry, meanwhile, sat on his bed, smiling at his little brother, while in the back of his mind thoughts were circling one another.

But there was no reason to air his frustration while Marcus was still present. So he listened, honestly interested, and waited till the late breakfast at Griffin House would be over.

“Have fun, Marcus!” Harry said, carefully waving with his free hand where it could be seen through the mirror, laughing at the cheerful chant of “I’m going to fly. I’m going to fly!” gradually getting less loud as Marcus followed Mrs. Peters out of the room.

Then the door fell shut and the smile slid off Harry’s face.

The slightly uncomfortable look on Marvolo’s face would have been funny if Harry hadn’t been quite as riled up as he still was.

“So,” Harry started and blinked in surprise at the unhappy grimace Marvolo made. It completely derailed what he had been planning to say.

“I’m sorry, Harry.” Marvolo filled the sudden silence between them. “While I did not really lie to you, I’m aware that leaving out information is just as surely not the truth as any lie would be. In my defence, I only can say that I wasn’t at my best and wanted to spare you the unnecessary upset that giving you all the details would have caused.”

Harry snorted, but couldn’t exactly contest the fact that Marvolo hadn’t told any lies while he had been resting, on his back, in the Wizengamot Chamber, after he had been attacked in an effort to kill him.

“I learned that Amos Diggory tried to kill you through the newspaper and rumours! How could that
have been any better? That my visitors had strict instructions from Madame Pomfrey to tell me nothing doesn’t make it any better either. I spoke to you more than once, Father! You could have told me anytime between Wednesday and Friday!”

The mirror wobbled, and Marvolo raked his hand through his hair, destroying the meticulous hairstyle. “I’m sorry. You knew all about the rumours and speculations around the shield, I had thought you had already heard Diggory had been the one to attack me. I thought it likely One of your friends certainly would have told you.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Sure. And my friends clearly thought that I had heard about the attack from you.” He snorted again, and took a few deep breaths. “I think you know that Madame Goyle was here yesterday evening to catch up on the session we missed last week?”

Marvolo nodded. “She also asked me to make room for an extra session to talk about the assassination attempt.”

“Probably a good idea.” Harry nodded, taking another deep breath. “We talked for some time, and I… well I hadn’t really thought about what a scuffle would have to be like that I would wake from emotions leaking through. You know?” Really, Harry wasn’t all that impressed with his own thinking on the matter. Something that led to leaking emotions from Marvolo had to be significant. Otherwise his father’s Occlumency shields should have been enough to prevent something like that from happening. They had been enough, combined with Harry’s own, to keep their minds separated for months now.

Marvolo nodded solemnly. “I was surprised that you called just then. But in retrospect, with you magically exhausted and me losing consciousness because of poison… it was a logical consequence.”

“Yes, well. We both know better now. And it isn’t as if you were in actual danger of dying,” Harry said, glad that he wasn’t out in the common room but had decided to stay in his own room for this talk. “But I guess it would have been awkward with so many witnesses?”

Marvolo sighed, leaning back into his chair. “I feel like you’re way too forgiving, Harry. Not that I’m complaining, as I’m the happiest I ever remember being with you and Marcus as my family. But you are allowed to hold a grudge. Because I did leave out important information. You know that, right?”

Now it was Harry’s turn to rake his hand through his hair, not destroying any neat hairstyle. “I know that I’m allowed, and maybe even justified to hold a grudge. But I don’t have to if I don’t want. And I much prefer being happy over being miserable. Your intention was good, and you were a little out of it. And there was an audience. So, maybe fewer assumptions over what I know or do not know will be a good way to handle stuff like that in the future?” That had been the plan Harry had come up with during his talk with Madame Goyle. She really had a way to get him to come up with solutions to his problems on his own, only occasionally offering advice and possible ways when it was clear he simply didn’t know. Those cases had been occurring less and less often recently.

Getting them both to visit with a therapist clearly had been one of Marvolo’s better ideas.

“In the spirit of not concealing important information. I’m currently in the process of once again adjusting a few steps in the ritual in preparation for trying one last time before the summer,” Marvolo suddenly changed the topic quite drastically. “I’ve asked both Bill and Healer Greengrass for their support again and am certain it’ll result in a ritual we can use this summer, once you’re back from school.”
Harry blinked, opened his mouth, closed it again, before speaking anyway. “After that only I will be left? And you’re comfortable with… having no fail-safes?”

Marvolo nodded once more. “Yes. I’m still working on accepting all the consequences. But seeing what I have missed out on, and what I have gained back since the number of them was reduced this much? It’s worth it, Harry. And I’ll make sure you can’t be harmed during the ritual.”

Harry felt a little drained, but nodded. “I know. And it’s silly that I would worry over something like this. Right? But I want you to let me know when you will next attempt the ritual, and then call me right afterwards. So I’ll know all went well.”

“As that’s not really complicated, I’m pretty sure I can manage that,” Marvolo said with a small smile. “And how is school going?”

Laughing a little, Harry went along with the change in topic and started to tell what had happened at Hogwarts since they last had spoken.

oooOOooo

Friday, 3rd of May 1996

“Come in, Severus,” Marvolo called out when there was a knock on the door. Henbane had informed him – of course – that there was a visitor and who it was, while Flimm had made sure that the Potions Master found his way to the office.

Not as if that had been necessary – Severus had been here a few times already and knew his way around – but the elves insisted on following the rules Marvolo had set. Escorting visitors inside their respective domains seemed to be one of those duties the elves seemed to cherish.

“My Lord,” Severus greeted with a respectful bow, sweeping into the room as he usually did, his robes billowing behind him.

Marvolo waved his hand at the chair he wanted Severus to take and settled down in the chair opposite the moment a tray with tea and biscuits appeared on the small side table between the chairs. That rivalry between the elves certainly had some useful side effects.

“Thank you for making time for me, Severus,” Marvolo said, pretty sure that he spotted Severus rolling his eyes at him while the other wizard was preparing a cup of tea for himself.

“I’m your son’s Head of House, my Lord. When you ask for a parent-teacher conference, there isn’t much I could do to not attend it.” Severus answered with dry politeness.

“True,” Marvolo had to concede. “But you could have called me to the school for this talk,” he just had to point out to the other.

Taking a sip from his tea, and settling more comfortably into his own armchair, Severus ignored that comment and went right for the reason they were here. “I assume that you have a question about your son’s performance in his lessons, my Lord?”
Adding a third spoon of sugar to his tea, stirring slowly, Marvolo answered. “I wanted to ask if the magical exhaustion has negatively impacted his lessons. And how well he’s prepared for the OWLs.”

“He seems to be doing well. And I’m pretty sure he didn’t need all the rest Madam Pomfrey made him take. Your son certainly has improved significantly in Potions, and not one of the other professors has made any complaints known to me. As Miss Granger is still among his friends, now bolstered by enough others to counter Mr. Weasley’s lack of ambition for the scholarly, he certainly gets enough time to study.”

“So he’s as prepared as anyone can be? That’s good to hear. Good OWLs will offer him more options.” Not that good marks in school were a necessity for a fulfilling life. Especially with Harry planning to take up the seat of House Potter in the Wizengamot and his interest in art, good grades in his OWLs weren’t all that important.

“He is, my Lord,” Severus said, picking up one of the biscuits with dried cherries in them.

“That’s good.” Marvolo nodded to himself. “I also decided on a name from your list of ideas. It did take longer than I had planned, but this wasn’t as important. Did you get an answer to your letter?”

“I did, my Lord. They would prefer for the potion not to be named after them, but were appreciative of being asked,” Severus said, visibly interested now that the topic had switched to something the Potions Master was more interested in than his students.

“Well then, the name shall be Anteros Potion. I like the possibility of ambiguity in the name, and if we’re being honest, the two-fathers-potion will be part of the name anyway. Too many people have already heard the working title, for it not to be used in the future,” Marvolo explained. He was pretty sure more than one student of Potions would stumble over the name, cursing him for that decision, and he was happy with that. Add a little history lesson to their essays. They probably would need the extra education anyway.

oooOOooo

Wednesday, 8th of May 1996

Slightly annoyed, Theo walked down the corridor towards Harry’s room. He just wanted to work on his homework, but everyone had evacuated the common room earlier when a relationship-meltdown had led to a shouting match. As Crabbe and Goyle had started a heated discussion over which shaving charm was the best – of all things – shortly after Theo had settled down in their dormitory to work, he had left the room with his things, hoping that the common room would be empty.

It had not been – in fact the sounds he had heard indicated that the couple had managed to resolve the problem – and so Theo had decided to try Harry’s room.

It wasn’t a long way from the dorm Theo and the others had shared since their first year to the door to Harry’s room, and to his knock there promptly was an “Enter!” called out from within.

So Theo opened the door and looked in, not daring to step over the threshold just yet. “May I ask
for refuge in your room, Harry? I need to get some actual work done on this essay. There’s no quiet place around here, and it’s too late for the library.”

Harry looked up from the sketchbook in his lap, and smiled. “Sure. Come in. You can have the desk.”

With one step Theo was in the room and closed the door behind himself. On his way over to the desk he had a good look at the room and everything in it. The normal dorm rooms were not bad, but this was on another level. More elaborate woodwork, silk-velvet hangings, a comforter made from silk by the look of it, carpet and rugs. It was a beautiful room. And the best part about the room was that there was so much more space than they had in the normal rooms.

Theo walked over to the desk, tidy and with built-in shelves filled with the books they were using this year, and placed his work down, before he sat down on the chair.

While Theo made good progress on his essay, Harry was working on a sketch. Besides the scratches of Theo’s quill on the parchment there also were the sounds of charcoal moving over paper.

After he had finished the conclusion of his essay, Theo cleaned the quill with a little wave of his wand, before resting it on the desk. “Harry.” Theo turned so he could look at his friend sitting on the bed. “You do know what caused that shield, don’t you?”

For a fraction of a second Harry looked like he had been caught red-handed, before he relaxed again, looking confused. “Why would you think that? Half of all the Unspeakables have been searching the village and found nothing.”

“Granger hasn’t been constantly talking about the shield. Wouldn’t she be researching and speculating if she didn’t know what the cause for the shield was? And if she already knows, then it’s only logical to assume that you know as well.” It had become more and more obvious from day to day as the speculation in the Prophet got wilder and wilder, but Granger, Hermione, whatever, only concentrated on the upcoming OWLs, homework, and lessons, ignoring the mystery right before their eyes. Theo knew her well enough by now to recognize when something was suspicious.

Harry groaned and covered his eyes with one hand, letting it slide down slowly, leaving behind a smear of charcoal on his nose. “It’s that obvious?”

Theo shrugged, struggling not to laugh out loud over the ridiculous image Harry made with that smear on his nose. “I guess not for everyone. But yeah, she’s normally like a crup with a bone when there’s something new to investigate. Or am I wrong?”

With another pass of his hand over his face, Harry made the smears a lot worse. “No. You’re not wrong. I know how the shield could protect everyone. But it would be better if as few people as possible know.”

Giggling – and wasn’t he glad that no one but Harry would know about that – Theo got a handkerchief out of his pocket and held it out to Harry. “You have charcoal on your face. So did you learn about the shield from Hermione?”

“No,” Harry answered, summoning the offered handkerchief from Theo’s hand without his wand. He wiped down his face and continued speaking after he had cleaned and folded the square of cloth. “Promise that you will keep this to yourself.”
When Theo nodded, not daring to say anything, Harry heaved a sigh and waved his hand, floating the handkerchief back to Theo. "I was the one who erected the shield. Neville, Ron, and Luna were close enough to see and asked while I was in the hospital wing. You know Hermione," Harry waved a hand, clearly referencing the whole situation, "she would have figured out that there was something Ron and Neville were hiding from her. And well, to avoid her accidentally making things worse with her digging, I told Ron he could tell her."

Theo felt his brows move up. Harry had conjured that shield? His friend was a lot more powerful than Theo had thought he was. And he had already thought Harry near Dumbledore’s level.

“You conjured that shield?” Folding his hands, Theo whistled. “No wonder you were out of it for a week. You didn’t use a simple protego. Did you?”

Harry shook his head. “No. I used something more complicated. Not sure if there is another way to get the same result. Probably nothing that would act as fast. If it should get out that it was me…” Harry trailed off, raking his hand through his hair and falling back onto the bed, staring at the canopy. “I guess at first they’ll heap praise onto me. But I guess once they have demanded and gotten an explanation… Then they’ll fear me… You know how that will end.”

Theo hummed. Harry was probably right. People would not be happy with the explanation – or non-explanation – Harry had just given him, they would want to know exactly what he had done. Establishing a shield to protect a whole village without preparation… Harry was someone powerful enough to be frightening. “No worries, Harry. I won’t tattle.”

The small smile on Harry’s face was relieved. “Thanks, Theo. Hadn’t thought you would. But the more people know, the more likely it is that someone else might learn of it.”

“And you just can’t risk it.” Theo nodded in understanding.

Harry nodded as well and in one move sat back up, grinning at Theo. “And how is your relationship with Ginny progressing? You both are very good at avoiding the public eye.”

Theo sighed. Well, he supposed Harry might be able to give advice, and his friend had just taken him into his confidence regarding the impossible-seeming feat of conjuring that shield. “She’s unhappy about the hiding, but not really willing to face her family, especially her mother, for now at least.”

“Mrs. Weasley is a force to reckon with,” Harry agreed, looking pensive. “But I think it might be a risk not to tell her family. What about when they learn about it and that you have been hiding your relationship? Wouldn’t that be worse?”

It was late – everyone in their room was already sleeping – when Theo slipped back to go to bed. It had been an interesting discussion. Theo wasn’t sure what to do, but he had new viewpoints to consider.

ooooOoooo

Saturday, 11th of May 1996
It was the game between Slytherin and Hufflepuff, and the whole school was trekking down to the pitch, spirits high.

Ginny was grinning from one ear to the other, her hand intertwined with Theo’s and swinging with their steps. They had talked about it and had decided not to hide their relationship any longer. Life was short, they were teenagers, and they had friends in common. And Harry’s worry about their families learning about them keeping it a secret had been valid. Ginny was sure her mother would not stop with sending an angrily worded letter.

Harry was somewhere farther back, walking with Luna and the Slytherins from his year not on the team, while Theo had agreed to sit with Ginny and her friends.

“And you’re willing to sit in the Gryffindor stands while Slytherin is playing?” Geoffrey Hooper asked with a teasing grin. “Man, you have it bad!"

Theo only smiled, making an effort to look extra dopey. “I wouldn’t be brave enough if Slytherin was playing Gryffindor today. But with it being Hufflepuff, the indignity is worth sitting with my girlfriend!”

The Creevy brothers started with cat calls, and Vicky giggled madly at Ginny’s other side. She knew she was smiling, and gave Theo’s hand a squeeze, before changing the topic. “Do you feel sufficiently prepared for the exams?”

They all knew that the end-of-year exams were pretty much around the corner, starting at the beginning of next month, but normally there was the unspoken rule of no school talk at the Quidditch games. So all Ginny got as answers were groans from her own year mates and the few friends of Dennis’ who were willing to walk with the boy’s older brother and his friends. “Really, Ginny! Way to go and ruin the mood!”

She gave an unrepentant shrug. “What? We’re not at the pitch yet! And I really want to know.” She had gotten a much better look at the exhausted and stressed fifth-years than was good for her own peace of mind. Really, if she hadn’t been with Theo she probably would have been able to ignore the stress rather better than she could now. Even the trade in presumably enhancing substances probably would have gone unnoticed. It had done all previous years.

Decidedly turning her thoughts away from all the reasons she wouldn’t have noticed something like that back in her very first year at Hogwarts, Ginny smiled at Theo. “And besides, I think Theo would like the distraction of someone else complaining about the amount of homework and exams and all that.”

Theo laughed, shaking his head. “No, thank you very much! Everyone is complaining! We do have students revising for their NEWTs, and all the other classes also preparing for exams. It’s not a solely Gryffindor condition, complaining over the lack of free time. I’m pretty sure even the Ravenclaws complain from time to time, and if only because all the repetition is depriving them of new things to learn.” That got a laugh out of everyone, and then they had to get up the stairs, and conversation stopped in favour of being able to breathe. While all the stairs kept them in reasonably good shape, the ascent up to the stands was a different matter. It was long and steep and not nearly broad enough to walk more than two abreast.

Once they had reached the place where they wanted to settle, Theo got his wand out and cast a cushioning charm on the seat for Ginny, who rolled her eyes at a first-year making gagging noises. “Really, you would think they would know what manners are.”

She saw Theo biting his lip, obviously restraining himself from making a comment, then once
again took his hand in one of hers. This was going to be good.

“If Hufflepuff manages to squash Slytherin good and quick, we almost won’t need to put much effort in at all to get the cup!” someone behind them proclaimed enthusiastically.

“Not very likely,” Theo said with confidence, grinning.

Getting out her omniclairs, Ginny searched the Slytherin stands to see if she could spot Harry and Luna. It was rather easy, as Luna had donned a silly hat which sported enchanted beads flying around it. Probably some kind of reference to Quidditch.

It still felt kind of unreal that Harry and Luna were a couple. But it seemed to work, and by now Ginny had realized that Harry was not likely to become an Auror or Quidditch professional, fitting the image of her dream partner. And through long thinking and talks with Hermione, she had realized that forcing someone else to change so drastically would make them rather unhappy, leading to unhappiness all around in a relationship.

Theo might not be the type to become an Auror or go into Quidditch, but he had expressed an interest in duelling, and his manners were rather charming.

Ginny really wasn’t sure if she would end up marrying Theo. But as she had realized by now, there was no reason why she should marry her first boyfriend – not that Theo was the first – out of school just as her mother had done. She was planning to get into Quidditch herself, so why should she follow in her mother’s footsteps? Not that there was anything wrong with choosing that path, it just wasn’t hers.

Then Lee Jordan announced the players and all thoughts turned to the game being played out between Slytherin and Hufflepuff.

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Wednesday, 15th of May 1996

And once again almost a month had passed since the last Wizengamot meeting. Not that they were placed exactly one month apart. But the meeting for May was today, and his classes for the day had an independent study project to finish and deliver to his classroom until the end of the day.

Severus hoped that the set maximum length would help facilitate better work from his students, and less work for himself in marking said work.

Severus was on his way down from the imposing fountain and the customary registration at the security desk to the Wizengamot Chambers when someone he didn’t really know – even those he had taught tended to look different at thirty than at seventeen – stopped him by way of addressing him from the side.

“Professor Snape! Or rather, Lord Prince. Isn’t it? I wanted to thank you for your quick action! You’re a hero, really!” More bewildered than understanding what was happening, Severus murmured some words that could be interpreted as thanks, and clearly conveyed a sense of urgency, allowing him to evade an actual conversation.
What had that been about?

By the fourth time he had been accosted by virtual strangers praising him for his quick thinking and for being prepared at all times, Severus had realised that those people were thanking him for his actions at the last Wizengamot meeting. Not that he felt that he really was deserving of such praise. Had he not stood there, watching his Lord handling the situation, when he had a wand at hand? Most of his comrades felt equally embarrassed over not acting to contain Diggory quicker. In fact they had rather expected to be harshly reprimanded for their lack of action. They were not sheep, after all. But there had been no crucios sent their way. If the order to think of a plan on how to get a regular evacuation practice for the whole Wizengamot was maybe a harsher punishment was still debated over.

“Severus,” Lord Slytherin greeted him the moment he came into calling distance of the other wizard. “Are you happy to escape a day of teaching children?”

Severus allowed himself a wry smile. “I’m not entirely sure that listening to old men bicker over inconsequential word choices is much of an improvement.”

Bemused, Severus watched his Lord roll his eyes. Such a human gesture. “At least with the children there is more potential for improvement.”

“Indeed,” was the only possible answer to that statement. Remembering the task he had been asked to carry out, Severus slipped his left hand into his robe pocket – and he really liked his Wizengamot robes even though they were not black – retrieving a small tin with ornamental enamel details in the forms of intertwined snakes on the lid.

“Your son asked me if I would be willing to give this to you, Lord Slytherin,” Severus said while extending his arm, hand turned so that the small tin sat on his open palm. “I helped him acquire this small token via owl-order.” In fact he had been greatly entertained by Mr. Slytherin coming to him on one of the evenings he spent in the Slytherin common room, asking for advice on how to acquire this present for his father. The reasoning behind the idea had been sound, and in a way it was almost a prank, if a caring one.

“Oh, did he?” Lord Slytherin asked, smiling, and picked up the tin without hesitation. A show of trust if there ever was one. “It’s quite a lovely tin.” The tone this was spoken in and the way the other man turned the tin over in his hands, indicated that he wasn’t quite sure what he should make of it.

“The tin is only an extra. The gift itself is stored inside,” Severus felt necessary to elaborate. One of Lord Slytherin’s brows winged up and he carefully opened up the tin to discover a quite unremarkable-looking stone-like object. His lips quirking upwards, eyes crinkled in amusement, his Lord addressed Severus. “I think that’s a not-so-subtle hint to take more care with my safety. Thank you, Severus, for your willingness to help him do this.”

“It was my pleasure.” And it really had been. It certainly was a good idea for Lord Slytherin to carry a bezoar with him at all times.

The session neared its beginning, and Severus walked over to his bench – made from a wood that had interesting colour differences and a nice grain, relatively simple with carvings of different poisonous plants – cast a cushioning charm so he would sit comfortably on the hard bench, and sat down.

The Chief Warlock called for order and declared the session started before handing over proceedings to Madame Bones.
“Thank you, Chief Warlock.” She performed the customary bow, before turning so she could address the whole gathering. “I’m here today to inform you all about our progress in the investigation into the terrorist attacks that were conducted using exploding howlers, and the assassination attempt on Lord Slytherin’s life.”

Well, that was a good start to the session. Something relevant and actually interesting. After that there was some reworking on the regulations of Quidditch pitches on the agenda. As far as Severus had understood from the material sent for preparation, the situation at some of the professional pitches had become dangerous, because muggle settlements were getting nearer. Not that it was a laughing matter – as it was concerning the statute of secrecy – but it wasn’t really that important either. And prone to descend into pointless bickering about teams being given unfair advantages, or disadvantages.

“Amos Diggory has proven to be uncooperative. He has expressed glee over someone taking action against who he claims to be traitors to our society, but doesn’t admit to any involvement. A search of his home has produced evidence of ongoing brewing of a few specific potions. Currently an analysis of the ingredients found in the search is under way. As soon as a result is obtained, you’ll be informed.” Which Severus read to mean that there had been everything needed to make howlers, and the DMLE was searching for evidence that would hold up in court. “His attempt on Lord Slytherin’s life was witnessed by such a great number of respectable wizards and witches, that the preparations for a trial for that is under way.”

Soon after that Madame Bones was finished and Severus’ prediction of descent into the madness of sport enthusiasts came true. With a resigned sigh, he resorted to employing Occlumency to keep his annoyance from showing on his face.

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Friday, 17th of May 1996

Healer Greengrass was once again sitting on a stool in the corner of the ritual room at Malfoy Manor, watching the proceedings. Marvolo had asked for his assistance in another iteration of the ritual they had been working on. Bill was amused that the healer still seemed to hold so much animosity towards him. But, well, giving up long-held beliefs and habits wasn’t easy.

In long discussions, none of them via letter, Marvolo and Bill had changed the ritual around quite a bit. Now the circle held elements to hold two humans in addition to the area where the horcrux would be placed. This time it was a locket with a big S made of green stones – probably emeralds, but Bill would have to examine it more closely to be sure – resting in that circle. It looked a little forlorn there, as they had changed the ritual circle so that this part was big enough for Harry to comfortably fit within.

Bill was sitting in the newly added circle in his role as the one to direct the whole ritual, while Marvolo was sitting in his own circle, now not the one actually conducting the ritual, but as one participating in it.

Their reasoning, won in long and sometimes hard discussions and research, was that while the creation of a horcrux was the effort of a single human, the inability to feel true remorse could be
mitigated by giving trust to another human not to muck things up. And Bill was pretty sure that not having to pick up the final chant from outside the circle would remove some elements of risk from the whole endeavour.

“Ready to start?” Bill asked, once more tucking the hem of his linen shirt over his knee in the hope it wouldn’t slip. A shame that rituals usually went better with less clothing involved that could get in the way.

“Yes.” Marvolo’s answer was short and Bill was pretty sure he could detect a hint of nerves under the carefully polite tone.

Not about to make the nerves worse by drawing attention to them, Bill started to speak the starting words, lighting the candles placed at strategic points, and setting the herbs – in earthen bowls – to smoulder, filling the air with fragrant scents.

Then Marvolo took up the chant, and the red smoke-like substance – Bill really had no better word for it – he had seen the previous time started to swirl up from the locket.

When the last tendril of smoke detached from the locket, Marvolo and Bill both simultaneously – and hadn’t they spent some time practising that – changed the chant, making the smoky cloud speed along directly towards Marvolo who doubled over and stopped speaking the moment the red cloud made contact with him.

With a racing heart Bill calmly finished the chant and the ritual, which ended with all the candles and smoking herbs being extinguished at the same time.

Now that the intricate circle was no longer needed, Bill didn’t watch where he stepped as he came to his feet and walked over to his seemingly passed out friend. He arrived there after the healer had already started casting diagnostics, and seeing the man’s face Bill felt better on the spot. There was no tension – a clear sign something wasn’t right that Bill had learned to recognize in the curse-breaker camps in Egypt – and the healer took the time to straighten Marvolo out to a more comfortable resting position on his back before standing back up.

“I think that went rather well,” Bill said, feeling a need to fill the silence, while he walked over to check the locket as he and Marvolo had discussed.

“If you say so,” Healer Greengrass said, sounding distracted and not at all approving. “He’ll need considerable rest, and more than a few painkiller potions.”

This time Bill let the healer take care of moving Marvolo into a bed, instead assessing the ritual workings, and writing down everything he had seen. By now he was pretty sure this was the safest they could get it, and the fact that Harry was alive – the most obvious difference from the other horcruxes they had extracted the soul shards from – should have no adverse effect at all.

While he was cleaning up – using soapy water and a mop – Bill very firmly didn’t think about the fact that the next time they would perform this ritual, Harry would be sitting inside the circle for the horcrux. Nothing good would come out of him worrying too much over things he could not change.

Even though Dumbledore was out of the picture and the Order had disbanded, the knowledge that Harry Potter was the vessel for a piece of soul binding Slytherin to this world, unable to be killed properly, was still out there. They had to change that fact if they wanted to make sure that Harry was only in a normal amount of danger from day to day.
Snorting, Bill plunged the mop back into the bucket before scrubbing furiously at a stubborn marking on the floor.

Wednesday, 22nd of May 1996

After dinner and with enough time before curfew, Harry had escaped to the library. Daphne and her little sister had insisted on going with him – the never really officially stated rule for him to never go anywhere alone, hadn’t been revoked – but now were working on something together a table over from where Harry had settled himself.

This morning an owl from Marvolo had brought him a selection of leaflets and catalogues containing information on several art courses and classes that were offered during the summer.

He wasn’t yet sure what he wanted to do. Acrylic painting? Oil? Watercolour? Or maybe something more like he was already doing, like sketching with charcoal? There were so many options!

And the availability of magical transportation didn’t restrict him to what was offered in London. But it would have made choosing a little easier. More options weren’t really helping in that regard.

And then there was the difference of a course that only was a week long, but all five weekdays were spent in the course from morning till evening, and those that went the whole summer, just on two days a week for an hour.

Harry felt overwhelmed in a kind of happy way. Never before – or so it felt – had he been able to chose just for himself, without any expectations on him.

Hopefully things would stay this way a while.

Taking out a notepad and a biro, Harry started to make some notes, deciding to go about choosing by deciding what technique he wanted to explore, and list what courses were offered for those. Maybe sticking with offers in London would also make it possible for Harry to go there on his own, not being forced to rely on one of the adults in his life to get him there.

While Harry placed slips of parchment into the information material, marking beginner courses in oil painting, he started to make notes of what sounded important or needed to be looked up. It took awhile for him to notice Mr. Filch walking in and going over to a small painting which hung between the shelves of books, where a small section of wall – probably a pillar – was level with the front of the bookshelves.

For a moment Harry forgot what he had come here to do and watched what Mr. Filch was doing. With careful motions and gloved hands the man took down the painting from the wall, murmuring something angry sounding. Then he turned and caught Harry watching.

Feeling heat rising into his face, Harry looked down again onto his current project, hoping that he hadn’t caused any anger in the caretaker.
And then Harry almost jumped out of his chair when he was suddenly addressed by the sour man. “Interested in what I’m doing?”

Blinking in surprise, Harry looked up and nodded. He really would love to know why Filch was taking a painting from the wall.

A few steps were all that was needed to get the caretaker to stand right next to Harry. The man turned the picture so that Harry could see the front and indicated a crudely drawn shape in one edge. “I wish I knew who had the gall to do something like this to some real art.” There was a subdued fury in the other’s voice, and Harry felt himself nodding.

It looked much like some of the graffiti one could see in public restrooms, and as if it had been done with a muggle permanent marker. The occupants of the painting – witches and wizards taking part in a picnic – had edged away from the spot at the edge that had been drawn on, looking agitated.

Why would someone do something like this?

“Can you get it clean again?” Harry heard himself ask and then remembered the deep gashes Sirius had inflicted on the portrait guarding the entrance to Gryffindor tower and how fast those had been repaired. “You were the one who repaired the fat Lady’s painting. Surely this is easy?”

“Not as easy as not needing to clean it,” Filch said. “But that’s not the first time something like this has happened. I have the right tools at hand. Are you interested to see how it’s done?”

That was an unprecedented offer as far as Harry knew. “I would love to. It’s not easy to learn something about all the art we have here at the castle.” In fact ever since he had started to contemplate art as a possible career, Harry had taken a much bigger interest in the art gracing the walls of the castle. Before he had mostly been interested in the people depicted, now he would love to know more about the people who had created the art in the first place.

“Do you know who created the pictures? And how it’s done?”

Harry was sure if he was to tell the others later they would insist he visit with Madam Pomfrey, but there it was an actual smile on the face of Filch. Unheard of before.

“Yes and a little, I take it you’re interested in art?” The caretaker’s eyes wandered over all the information leaflets spread out on the table before returning to Harry himself.

“I am,” Harry said nodding, and suddenly felt as if he should be standing, but stayed seated. “Currently I’m trying to decide which courses to take during summer. And I got a list of Masters of the arts who might be interested in taking on an apprentice. The advice I’ve been given is kind of vague, and I really am unsure how to go about creating a portfolio, or how to approach a Master. It’s all very confusing, and the library hasn’t been all that useful so far.”

Once again Harry felt the heat rising in his face. That had come out rather unexpected and all at once.

How mortifying.

He wasn’t even sure Mr. Filch would be willing to help him at all. Thinking back to all previous interactions between them, Harry felt that he had not really left a positive impression.

“It’s a little late now,” Filch finally said. “But I can recommend a few books, if you want to read about notable wizarding painters and artists. And maybe after you’ve finished your OWL exams I
can show you a bit of my work?” There was a beat of silence, not even the low murmur from Daphne and Astoria still present, before Filch continued speaking. “The most important thing is to keep practising and experimenting. You’ve got time still, boy. No need to skip steps or despair.”

And with those ominous words the man was gone, leaving a dazed Harry behind.

Practising. He could do that.

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Monday, 27th of May 1996

“Settle down please!” Professor Slinkhard called from the front of the class, and reluctantly the students all around did so. Harry wasn’t really enthusiastic for these lessons. It was better than Umbridge had been. But certainly the lessons were duller than any conducted by one of the other professors they had had.

“As the OWL examinations draw nearer, we need to change the focus of our lessons.” Harry didn’t dare hope, but he could see a few of the others perking up. “As it is hardly ideal to expect you to cast spells for your practical examination without practising them first. So, starting today, you’ll get to practise the most important defensive spells in a controlled environment.”

With a flourish one single dummy was moved from a hidden corner right next to the professor’s desk at the front of the class.

Harry felt his brows go up. One single dummy? That really didn’t look promising.

“Each of you will get a turn to cast the assigned spell, after which I and your fellow students will offer help on what to change if needed. Please keep order so that everything can proceed calmly and orderly. We’ll start with the stunner, and in the front row.” He pointed to the first student desk at his right side – Harry’s left – and smiled encouragingly. “Please come forward, bring your wand and take position over by the mark on the floor.” With a small dust of sparkles a line appeared a few paces away from the dummy.

“Please also keep in mind that practising these spells without adult supervision is a foolish endeavour and you shouldn’t do it. That’s what these lessons are for. Do you understand?”

They gave their assent and then watched as one after the other they cast the stunner at the dummy, seemingly surprising their Professor with their success. Harry had to remind himself to actually speak the incantation, and was one of many students back in their seats pretty quickly as they cast correctly on their first try.

“Well, I have to say that went better than I expected,” was Professor Slinkhard's surprised comment when Neville sat down as the last one to cast the stunner. “We have enough time to try our hand at another spell. Let’s see. Bombarda is a useful spell against a great number of possible threats. Let me demonstrate it one more time.”

While the professor did exactly that, going into an agonising amount of detail, Harry contemplated that the duelling club was working out rather well, judging by the spells he had seen cast in this
lesson. Maybe he should try to get some serious revision in into the next session. It probably would be a lot more useful than this silly insistence on safety.

When Hermione came back from her turn at the spell, she rolled her eyes, and Harry hid a grin behind his hand, pretending he had to yawn. It said a lot about the teaching methods of a professor when Hermione disapproved.

Chapter End Notes

Keeping the balance between showing as much as one can and not losing the way in a tangle of different plotlines isn’t easy. But as I don’t want to end up like George R. R. Martin, I decided to not fill in all the days in between with scenes of all those plotlines that I have faded out as they lost relevance to the main plot, sticking with the main characters and their actions through the month of May, highlighting the most important happenings. I’m hoping you’re not too cross with me.
(I checked, just had to, and I haven’t reached the number of words in the entire series of “A Song of Ice and Fire” yet. It seems to be around 1,770,000 words at the moment.)

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Wednesday, 29th of May 1996

“All I’m saying is that it shouldn’t be this hard to get permission for this kind of thing,” one of the other curse-breakers in the changing room said forcefully the moment Bill stepped out of the shower room, only a towel wrapped around his middle, water running down his chest, arms, and legs in small rivulets.

“Permission for what?” he asked as the conversation fell silent. It had occurred to Bill more than once by now that some of his colleagues here at Gringotts, who didn’t know him that well yet, were careful of what they said when he was in hearing distance. It was frustrating, and kind of infuriating, if understandable. The Weasleys were known to have been on the side of those banning magic deemed too dangerous most of the time, and known as active supporters of the fight against Voldemort and everything labeled *dark magic*. Not that Bill himself was happy over how everything had been tarred with the same brush. But how should the others know that?

“Research into old rituals that can’t be used any longer,” was the short and relatively harmless sounding answer.

Bill hummed, walking over to his locker to get another towel out of it. “I guess you’re talking about those where part or all of the needed ingredients are simply no longer available rather than those which have been, for more or less good reasons, banned from being used as they are?” There were indeed a few rituals which had been used in curse-breaking in the past that were now no longer available. Mostly because plants or animals they depended on were no longer available. Chief among them was a containment circle which had been so widely used that the small rodent-like animal had become extinct due to overuse.

“The ones where we can’t get all that’s needed. Getting permission for research into them, so we might find a substitute or rework it so that we can work without so much risk.” There were a few murmurs of agreement, and Bill nodded silently -- because he agreed that many containment circles and rituals weren’t that easily replaced with wards -- and ignored a muttered remark of “Having a good look at some of that banned stuff wouldn’t go amiss either.”

“Have you applied for permission, Brown?” Bill asked, sorting through the pile of his clean clothes in search for his socks.

“I tried,” Brown answered, returning to inspect a big hole in his protective robes. “But the people in the administrative offices of the Experimental Magic Department want to have all kinds of forms, and preliminary research and stuff. And to do *that*, I would need access to some books, but to get the access, I would need to have permission to work on a specific ritual. It would be funny if
Having found his socks, Bill quickly slipped on his undies and sat down to put them on. “Yeah, if you don’t have access to an extensive library of your own, that’s pretty impossible to manage,” he agreed, thinking how lucky he had been to be helping Marvolo with his work on the horcrux extraction ritual. If he would be interested in the research into the old containment circles? “Did you try to find a sponsor of some kind?” There was also always the possibility of asking the Goblins, but then they would insist on a contract giving them the rights to whatever you might find or create. Not the best idea usually.

“Because I’m pals with that many Lords and Ladies who actually have any of the relevant books for this.” The sarcasm was thick enough to walk on, and Bill made a grimace in sympathy. That was indeed a problem. The Malfoys probably would have all the books needed for the research, but they would never willingly admit as much.

“Would you be interested in working together with someone though?” Bill just had to ask. There was a distinct possibility that this project would fall right into Marvolo’s interests, and all curse-breakers everywhere would benefit from this, if they could get it to work. “You know someone?” Brown seemed sceptical, but the repairs on his robes – Bill idly wondered what had caused that much damage – were momentarily forgotten.

“I’ve got a friend,” and wasn’t that a surprising development, “who has a great interest in curse-breaking. We often get into deep theoretical discussions, and he has a talent for finding books.” Bill was pretty sure that Marvolo’s connections with those families who had claimed their members had been forced or coerced into being Death Eaters, or had officially distanced themselves from their Death Eater relatives, had much closer contact with Marvolo now than they led everyone to believe. Why else would Healer Greengrass still work for him? Why would the Malfoys let Marvolo use their ritual room? Why would Lord Lestrange let the man adopt another child?

“And he wouldn’t insist on claiming everything?” Brown wanted to know, probably not really believing that would be true.

Bill slipped into his leather trousers, and pulled on the shirt over his head, answering while in the process of getting dressed. “I would have to ask him. But he's likely to agree with being a figure in the background. He’s more interested in such stuff out of a love for everything magic, the less commonly known the better.” Bill felt himself smiling. “I’ll let you know what he says.”

“Sure,” Brown said and when Bill left a few minutes later, on his way to meet up with Fleur for a nice night out, he felt confident that he had maybe established himself as independent from his family a little more this day.

Minerva rubbed her eyes, pinched the bridge of her nose, and then grabbed her glasses from the table in front of her to slip them back on. She had made her way to the teacher’s lounge early – leaving behind her half-eaten dinner – to get a few moments of peace.

The job of Headmistress was a bigger headache than she had anticipated. Especially because she
was trying to sort out those blocked funds tied to specific classes being offered at the school. The other blocked funds were even more complicated and would have to wait.

Getting the money only if a certain class was offered made hiring a teacher to actually offer the class kind of difficult. And getting students to actually take the classes not offered yet also wasn’t easy.

Maybe finding people passionate about those topics would be the way to go. Offer them rooms to teach in and maintain the classes even if there was just one pupil to take them. Getting one subject reinstated that way might be enough to convince others that she was being serious when she was searching for someone to teach Latin, or Warding, Healing, or arts. Just to name a few.

Before she could fall down that hole again, the others started to arrive.

“Hello, Minerva,” Filius said, walking over to his favoured chair, leaving the door open so Severus and Septima could walk in, also taking their usual seats around the conference table.

“We saw each other just a moment ago, Filius,” Minerva said with an eye roll, still feeling better for the friendly greeting.

“No excuse for being rude,” was the cheerful reply, which caused Severus to roll his eyes, bringing a grin to Minerva’s face.

A plate of ginger biscuits appeared on the table, along with a big pitcher of lemonade and one with iced tea. The weather had been improving recently and summer wasn’t far away any longer, even this far north.

Pomona was the last to enter, and she closed the door behind herself before sitting down in her customary seat.

“Thank you all for coming,” Minerva opened the meeting, drawing the attention of all her colleagues. “How are the reviews for OWLs and NEWTs going?” Each year it was the same, exam time wasn’t only stressful for the students taking their big exams, it also was a time of high workload for the professors. Preparing exams for five years of their students, preparing the OWL and NEWT students for their important tests, and coping with hysterics and all the results of too many long nights spent studying.

“My classroom only blew up three times,” Severus said in a deadpan voice, his hands folded on the table in front of him. “The exams are prepared and I think my NEWT students should be able to withstand the stress.” He didn’t say anything about the OWL students, but he never did anyway.

“I’m pretty confident in the ability of my students to pass their exams,” Wilbert took up the conversation with a smile on his face after Severus dropped it so suddenly, then turned to Filius. “I think your duelling club might have contributed to that quite a lot.”

Minerva was pretty sure more than one of them thought the same at that very moment. If anyone had anything to do with the success of the students in Defence, it probably was Mr. Slytherin, who was the main teacher at those duelling club meetings. Filius had expressed his awe over how well Mr. Slytherin prepared those meetings, together with his friends, and the boy’s patience in explaining things to the other students. Filius even had asked her if she knew if Mr. Slytherin was considering a career in teaching.

She didn’t know and wasn’t sure if she could ask Severus about that career advice session. He was usually pretty concerned about keeping his students' privacy protected. If there was no reason for
anyone to be involved, he wouldn’t involve anyone else. And if transfiguration or special
arrangements, like an apprenticeship during school years now that she was Headmistress, weren’t
part of it, there was no reason to involve her.

“That’s good to know. They suffered from a rather disjointed education.” Which was the
understatement of the year.

“Have any of you noticed students we need to keep a special eye on?” Minerva changed the topic
and moved the meeting along. And it wasn’t even all that obvious, as this was a standard question
at this time of year. Usually they kept an eye out for those students regularly visiting Poppy in the
infirmary because of sleepless nights, stress-induced stomach problems, and other such difficulties.
And there also were those students they felt would try to cheat.

Which no one had done successfully – as far as they knew – in almost a hundred years, or
something around that timespan.

“I think we need to find the cause for all those cases of sudden nosebleeds, fevers, stomach bugs,
and fainting.” Severus stated with a smirk on his face. In fact his classes didn’t have a sudden
increase of those ailments, but many of the classes of the others did. Especially in the lower years,
and in Transfiguration, History, and Herbology when work with fertilizers had been announced.

They all had their suspicions, of course, but their two suspects always had been good at covering
their tracks if they put their minds to it.

“Good luck with that,” Pomona said with a snort. “We all know who sells that stuff. Whatever it is.
And I see no way to actually prove anything. Do you?” She turned to look at Severus, who grinned
again.

“No,” Severus said amicably. “I don’t think I do, but if I’m not wrong, it seems as if the supply has
tapered down. Maybe even to nothing since the spring holidays. Have you noticed? The frequency
of suspicious incidents you have informed me of has declined.”

Minerva felt her eyebrow wing up. Could it be true that the Weasley twins had run out of material
to sell? Or would they stop selling whatever it was the students were using just in time for exams
to remove temptation?

“I’ll keep an eye out. It’s the usual candidates,” Poppy spoke up. “And the number of potions I
have handed out so far isn’t bigger than any previous year. No need to worry, Minerva.” The medi-
witch’s face scrunched up, looking over Minerva in a calculating way. “Do you get enough sleep,
dear?”

Minerva waved Poppy’s concerns away. “Not as much as I would like, but it’s not long until
summer now, and even if there’s still enough work to fill the whole summer, I certainly will get
more freedom in how I organise myself. Don’t worry, Poppy.”

That got a discussion over holiday plans started and effectively ended the work-related meeting.

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Saturday, 1st of June 1996
The weather was pleasantly warm, and dry – which was much more important today – with any luck they would be able to go swim in the lake later in the summer. Both Sirius and Remus were sitting in a small cluster of young trees, resting on the soft bed of moss, waiting for moonrise.

Thinking how nifty the wards around this part of the grounds of Potter Manor were, Sirius turned his face up towards the rustling leaves. “As Harry’s history tutor, what do you think about the chances Harry has to gain an OWL in History?”

Remus snorted. “You want to talk about schoolwork?” Sirius rolled his eyes, but didn’t react. “You, Sirius Orion Black, lackadaisical student all your life, cutting corners whenever possible. Hell! Sometimes even when there was no possible way to cut any corners! And you want to talk about History and exams on the evening of the full moon? Who are you? And what have you done with my friend?”

Once more rolling his eyes, Sirius flung out one arm, aiming at Remus, but only brushing the other's loose robes. They planned to slip out of their clothing with enough time to spare before the moon rose, Sirius transforming into Padfoot to spend the night running around with his friend.

“Yes, I want to talk about my godson. Who is going to be taking his OWLs pretty soon. I’m sorry if that’s a shock for you. And now answer the question.”

Remus laughed. “If he keeps his head he should easily manage an acceptable. Not sure if he really is interested in taking the subject up to NEWT. Wait,” Remus interrupted himself. “No, that’s not true. I’m pretty sure that he isn’t interested in taking History of Magic with Binns as a teacher any longer.”

They both laughed for long moments before they chuckled a few more times and fell quiet once again.

“He’s so big already,” Remus sighed, sitting up. “It doesn’t feel quite real.”

“Yeah,” Sirius agreed sitting up as well, then changed the topic somewhat. “I got another letter from the twins. They’re preparing for their exams as well. If I hadn’t recklessly run after Peter, I would have seen Harry grow up. And maybe even would have known about Nawel and Enora much earlier. It feels kind of sad knowing all I’ve missed. Their first words, learning to walk, the first bout of accidental magic…” Sirius trailed off, sighing.

“And maybe you still wouldn’t have known, and maybe wouldn’t have found them even now, because you never would have looked,” Remus said quite reasonably. “The what-if game isn’t one you can win, Sirius. Let it be.” Much more brightly, he continued. “But you’re in regular contact with the girls?”

That transparent effort to change the topic got Remus a dark look from Sirius, before he started to smile. Remus was right, of course, and there was no use in entertaining thoughts of what-if. “Yeah, we write regularly. They’ve started to teach me some French. Not speaking of course, but reading, and words that are in more common use outside of continental France. It’s interesting. And I hope I’ll get in some practice of actually speaking over the summer.”

“And how is contact with Olivienne progressing?” Remus’ look was much too innocent for Sirius to trust it.

“You know that well enough, Remus. She still insists on writing in French and you know that!”
After all, Sirius had had to ask for help translating something more than once. “If you want to know how I feel about the whole thing, tricking me isn’t necessary.”

Remus’ look pretty much stated his disbelief of that claim, and Sirius knew himself well enough to silently agree. He never had been one to speak about how he felt about any situation that could be described as difficult. Jokes and pranks always had been as much passion as distraction and diversion.

So Sirius huffed and did change the topic, bringing up – in a low blow – Remus’ own relationships. “Did Dora ask you out again?”

Remus cast him another grumpy look, before looking out into the airy woods around them. “She did, actually. Not that she has a lot of time at the moment with the howler investigation, or Diggory’s murder attempt. The whole Auror Department is buried in work. But she asked me to meet her for lunch sometime next week.”

The blush on his friend’s face made Sirius grin. It was much more fun speaking of the love-woes of others. “And where will you go?”

The blush got deeper. “What do you mean? Where would we go? I thought the Leaky would be a nice place.”

“Remus, it’s a date! You can’t really consider the Leaky Cauldron! Really?” Sirius turned towards his friend in astonishment. The Leaky Cauldron wasn’t a place to take a girl to for a date. A nice muggle restaurant would be a much better choice.

“Sirius! It’s a lunch date. She’s at work before and after. She won’t have time to change into something else! I thought about the nice Indian place a few streets over from your house, but, well… She can’t really go to a muggle place in her robes, can she?”

Well, Remus had a point. So Sirius nodded. Maybe a date at the leaky Cauldron wasn’t all that bad after all. One needed to consider the circumstances. “That’s true, I guess. But try to invite her. Not that she’ll let you.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, listening to the small animals around in the woods, the birds fluttering from branch to branch, waiting for the moment to shed their clothing and become their animal selves.

Sirius loved the nights of the full moon. It was absolute freedom to run without worry in the warded woods, alongside his friend, playing, hunting small game – rabbits, rats, and the like – leaving all human troubles behind for a while.

And with dry grass and fresh moss under his paws, it was even more fun than with snow and mud covering the ground.

Sunday, 2nd of June 1996
Harry started to pack his things – books, notes, learning cards, and all the other stuff – drawing the attention of all his friends sharing a study space with him.

“Where are you going?” Hermione asked, barely looking up from her runes dictionary, puzzling over a complicated translation exercise.

“Meeting with Mr. Filch. I told you all when we started. Remember?” Harry explained, rolling up a few unused sheets of parchment, and looking around the unused classroom they had claimed for their study session, which involved casting magic to see if there was anything else he should pick up.

“What have you done to earn a detention now?” Ron asked, looking up from his notes with a frown on his face, in honest confusion.

Harry snorted as did Theo, Ginny, and Luna. “It’s not a detention, Ron! He said he would show me some of his work.”

“Cleaning?” Ron looked even more confused now, as if there was a prank happening here and he was trying to figure it out.

Harry laughed and closed his bag. “Not cleaning, dusting, mopping the floor or any of that, Ron. Mr. Filch actually is working with all the paintings in the castle. Cleaning, repairing…” Harry waved his hand around trying to convey that there was much more to the position Mr. Filch filled at the castle than most gave him credit for. “He learned that I’m interested in art. And he studied art, offered to let me watch him work. I’m curious, so I accepted.”

It was more than clear that Ron really didn’t get why Harry would spend time with Argus Filch on a Sunday afternoon. But he didn’t say any of the things probably flashing through his mind. Ron just looked back down at his notes, frowning again, and mumbled a distracted, “Have fun!”

Theo gave Harry a wink, Hermione just waved absentmindedly, and Ginny didn’t even look up, clearly lost in whatever she was reading, sitting on the floor with her back resting against Theo’s legs.

Daphne was practising banishing charms with her sister, both going through the list of fourth-year charms one by one. Draco had excused himself, going for a fly, and Neville had decided that an afternoon in the greenhouses would do him some good.

With a smile on his face, happy over the large number of friends he now had in more than one House, Harry slipped out of the room and made his way down the corridor towards his destination.

That destination wasn’t the office everyone knew about, the room holding many confiscated items and the records of all detentions ever served by any Hogwarts student – at least the twins claimed that that was the case – but Mr. Filch’s workroom, which was on ground level in an out-of-the-way corner of the castle.

It took Harry a while to reach the room, and he felt unexplainable nervous once he stood in front of the door, hesitating to knock.

Mr. Filch didn’t really interact often with students outside of his duty as caretaker, supervisor of detentions, and enforcer of the no-magic rule in the halls. Harry’s own interactions up till now had been less than ideal. The evening of his detention in the Forbidden Forest, and the evening of Halloween during the whole Chamber of Secrets fiasco when Mr. Filch had assumed that it had to have been Harry who had petrified his cat.
Taking a deep breath and reminding himself that there hadn’t been any real harm done, Harry raised his hand and knocked decisively on the door.

Offering Harry advice and a look into art was more than enough compensation for the detour back in first year and the accusation uttered in a moment of terror and grief during Harry’s second year.

“Enter!” was called from inside, and Harry opened the door to do just that.

Harry greeted him politely and took a good look around. The room was not what Harry had been expecting, though if he would be hard-pressed to describe what he had expected.

One whole wall was outfitted with windows, shades drawn so that no direct sunlight could find a way inside. The room was rather large, having a big – and that was very big indeed – table placed in the middle of the room. Another wall was covered in shelves, filled with jars filled of colourful powders, boxes of cardboard and of wood, rolled-up canvas, brushes, and a number of tools Harry had no names for.

Mr. Filch was standing at the last wall – not counting the one with the door, Harry had just come through – an easel in front of him holding a painting of a hunting scene, as far as Harry could tell. The air was filled with the distinct smell of strong vinegar-based cleaners.

Carefully Harry moved closer to where the other was working, highly concentrated.

 ooOoo

“Come over, Mr. Slytherin,” Argus called the youngster over, reassured that it had been a good idea to invite the boy here by the careful way he moved around the room, and didn’t touch everything in sight without thought.

This was the first time Argus had invited anyone into this room. Not even the Headmaster had been here since the first day of Argus working here. It did look likely that this idea wouldn’t turn into a disaster.

“Have you decided on a class for your summer yet?” Argus picked up their conversation from the library, carefully brushing a last spot of pigment on the place he had had to repair the canvas of the hunting scene that normally was placed in a corridor near Ravenclaw tower.

“I have, actually,” the boy answered, staying well out of Argus’ way, and the light, which was more important anyway. “I think working with oil paints is something I can’t practice all that well during the school year. So I’ll try that. And then maybe a shorter course on how to sketch people.” The boy sounded a little embarrassed.

Argus subtly turned, pretending to check the colour he had been mixing, and saw a light blush on the boy’s face. What fifteen-year-old wouldn’t be tempted by an art class teaching drawing with live models? “Sounds like a good plan to me,” Argus said and hummed, cleaning his brush in a big glass of water – he liked the tinkling sound the brush’s metal parts made against the glass – before setting the brush down so it would stay in shape as it dried.

“Let’s go over to the table.” Argus gestured to the table where he had laid out the painting from the library. “I thought you might be interested in how I’m going to remove that muggle marker.”
The boy seemed eager enough and sat down on the stool Argus indicated.

“As you can see I’ve taken of the frame, and removed the stretcher,” Argus started to explain, slipping on the cotton cloves, enchanted not to let anything through, be it sweat from his hands, or anything he used to clean the paintings he worked with. “And I have decided that the varnish on this picture is in need of replacement. Generally the paints and varnishes used on magical paintings are much more durable than muggle products from the same time. Especially in a place as magically charged as Hogwarts.” It felt good explaining this to someone who was actually listening. Maybe he should revisit the idea of teaching some summer classes of his own.

“But this painting, according to the records kept here at the castle, hasn’t been re-varnished since it first came to the castle back in the twelve hundreds. So first I’ll remove the marker, then I’ll remove the other surface dirt, before finally removing the varnish, which has yellowed with age.”

The boy next to him was almost vibrating, not with the desire to be gone, to be anywhere but here, but with questions.

“You can ask questions, if you have any.” He had brought the boy here to nourish a young artist, in the hope of carefully fanning the flame, so he should be able to ask questions.

“How will you be able to clean up the marker but not damage the painting?” It was an obvious question, but not a bad one.

“Remember that there is also varnish between the marker and the paint. I’ll move carefully with the cleaning solution I have mixed here.” Argus indicated a small glass jar that could be closed with a metal screw-on lid. “And even though that probably will at least partially affect the varnish, it won’t reach the paint at all.” Which was good, because most of the cleaning solution was pure alcohol, one of the more reliable ways to remove most permanent markers. “That’s another reason why I decided to take off the varnish as well. It’ll probably be damaged in that spot where I need to remove the permanent marker, and it’s easier to replace it all together then trying to touch it up.”

Getting out his cotton swabs, Argus then screwed off the lid and dipped the first swab carefully into the cleaning solution. “I diluted this as much as possible, so it’ll go slowly. But we have time. If the cleaning is too fast it might burn a hole through the whole painting – canvas an all – before I can get it off again.”

The time until dinner flew by, with Mr. Slytherin occasionally asking an intelligent question – were potions part of the usual varnish? what was the purpose of a varnish in the first place? what were the differences between non-magical and magical varnishes? – and Argus explaining all of his actions, why he had chosen the specific method he was using over other possibilities, and under what circumstances he would have chosen something different.

It certainly had been one of the more pleasant afternoons in a long while.

They parted ways with Mr. Slytherin promising to bring a small example of his art to school after the summer holidays. There really wouldn’t be much time for them to repeat the afternoon in the remaining term. Exams did that to a student's timetable.

With a rare smile on his face, Argus made his way to the kitchen. He wouldn’t expose his good mood to rambunctious, sticky children to have it die a swift death. Better to eat alone in his quarters, after ordering something with the elves, and then read, than risk his good mood needlessly.
Harry met up with his friends again just at the end of the main stairs, but before he could call out to them, a sixth-year from Ravenclaw – Carmichael, if Harry wasn’t mistaken – came over with a secretive air about him.

“Hey, Slytherin! Interested in getting a little boost for your exams starting tomorrow?” the other boy asked, turning so his back was to the doors into the Great Hall, getting a small phial from his bag, which was filled with something only lightly coloured green and oily. “Too late to boost your revision. This,” he shook the bottle carefully, “is solely responsible for my nine outstanding OWL results.” Harry was pretty sure Carmichael wanted him to be impressed by that. “But it’ll also help with remembering stuff during the exams. So are you interested?”

Harry didn’t get to answer – in the negative because his father had told some really gruesome stories about what had been sold during his time at Hogwarts, and Harry had no illusions that that aspect had changed by much – as Hermione stepped up in just that moment.

“Carmichael! Do I have to report you to Professor Flitwick? This isn’t the first time I’ve caught you trying to swindle students out of their money by selling bogus Baruffio’s Brain Elixir. Hand it over,” she called the older student out, holding out her hand palm up in a motion reminding Harry of a primary teacher he’d once had, confiscating a pack of sweets from another pupil.

The Ravenclaw handed the phial over and managed to vanish from sight before Hermione could demand to search his bag for any others he might have had.

“It’s outrageous how many of our fellow students use the importance and stress of the exams to swindle others for monetary gain.” Hermione shook her head and cast a banishing charm at the phial, emptying it of its dubious contents.

During that exchange the others had caught up to them and had stopped to watch Hermione ranting, as she was wont to do. And then Hermione fell quiet, staring over to the entrance to the castle. “Are those the examiners?” she asked with a comically faint voice.

They all turned, almost as one, and looked over to the big doors, watching as Headmistress McGonagall greeted a group of elderly witches and wizards. And just as they had turned as one, they didn’t need words to decide that they were curious enough to time their arrival at the entrance to the Great Hall so they and the group of professors reached it at the same time.

“It’s so sad that the dear suffered so terribly from that curse,” an elderly, slightly bent over witch, said to the Headmistress. “I remember how he took his OWLs and NEWTs, such a bright lad. It makes one think, doesn’t it, when someone you knew as a young one suddenly declines so harshly due to age.”

Professor McGonagall seemed seriously out of her depth, rapidly changing the topic, just as Harry and his group of friends walked past them into the hall. “It certainly made me think hard, when the first children of students I had taught came to be my students as well. I hope you’ll join me for dinner today, and maybe take part in the school’s meals with everyone else.”

Then they were out of earshot inside the usual hubbub that was dinner at Hogwarts when everyone was excited. The friends split up, Luna catching Harry’s hand to draw him near for a short kiss, going to their respective tables to sit down and eat.
Everyone was to tense and focused on the exams beginning tomorrow morning to care much for socialising.

“I’m kind of glad that you’ve decided to sit here today, Harry,” Theo said as he settled down next to his friend. “As much as I like sitting with Ginny, enduring Hermione and her constant chatter about past exams, all the anti-cheating enchantments, and whatnot would drive me to do something unfortunate today.”

“Like what?” Harry asked, grinning to himself as he reached for a bowl of mashed potatoes. After that intense time with Mr. Filch in the man’s workroom, he was famished.

“Like emptying a saucier of this fine gravy over her head.” Theo said, picking one saucier up to put a generous amount of said gravy on top of his selected vegetables and piece of shepherd’s pie.

“That would indeed be unfortunate.” Draco said from a few seats over, reaching for a bowl of steamed and glazed carrots. “I can vividly imagine the lectures you would get.”

“Lectures?” Theo asked, emphasising the s at the end, clearly asking why Draco thought Theo would get more than one lecture over something silly as starting a food fight.

“Yes,” Draco answered with relish. “First by Granger of course. After she got over the shock, naturally. She has giving lectures down pat. Then by the Headmistress. She’s right there, after all. And after that,” the glee on Draco’s face was only surpassed by the one in his voice, “at least one week worth of detentions, I would guess. Professor Snape would delight in making it quite clear in front of the whole House what an utterly idiotic idea it would be to do something so asinine in front of that many witnesses.”

They all started to laugh, Harry carefully setting down his goblet of milk so he didn’t spill anything, and Daphne almost doubling over she was laughing so hard.

When Blaise started to imitate what Professor Snape would sound like, they were hopelessly lost to laughter for at least ten more minutes after Blaise had finished with a “Next time employ a little more subtlety and don’t get caught” in a haughty voice, and with a snarl on his face.

When Harry could sit up straight again, carefully using a handkerchief to wipe away the tears from laughing so hard, he grinned over to Draco and Blaise. “Thanks, I think we all were in need of that.” he said before starting in on his food, that thankfully was still warm. There were many good things to be said for charms keeping food warm on the tables.

Monday, 3rd of June 1996

“Hermione, please!” Ron was at his wits' end. And as good a friend as she was most of the time, currently Hermione was killing his last nerve. “Do you really think you can learn more now? Just moments before the exam will start?” Yes, it was true that Ron had read – or tried to at least – all his notes on Charms the previous evening, his hands clamped over his ears to shut out the worst noise, but surely now the day of the exam was too late?
“And you do know everything anyway!” That clearly had been the worst thing he could have said.

“I don’t know everything, Ronald Weasley!” Hermione all but screeched, prompting Parvati to cover her ears with her hands, bent over a book in her lap.

And she didn’t stop there. Ron was kind of dazed only a few moments in, wondering how someone who could remember over twenty instances of having gotten something only slightly less than perfect, could think so little of their own capability to remember stuff.

“Please, Hermione, for the sake of us all, cut it out,” one of the twins cut Hermione’s rant short – well, shorter at least – from the side as they all got up from their seats to leave the Hall and wait outside. “We get that you feel you have to be excellent in everything you attempt to do. And we get that you’re insecure about all the stuff. But believe us, you’ll do just fine.”

The other twin shouldered his bag and placed an empty goblet back on the table. “A little tension is good. But too much will hinder you, especially in the practicals in the evening. So try to relax a little, Hermione. You’ve got a solid foundation built over the last five years. You don’t need to learn everything now, like some others.”

Ron still tried to decide if that last bit had been a dig at him – he really had not paid as much attention to school as he should have – when they came out of the Great Hall and saw a distinctive figure standing just inside the entrance hall. “What’s he doing here?”

Harry had just stepped out of the Great Hall after the others who were going to take the Charms exam today, when he spotted a familiar figure standing there waiting.

“Dad!” He had covered the distance between them and had thrown his arms around Marvolo before his thoughts had caught up with him. Then he stiffened. Worried that this open display of affection – he had called Marvolo dad! He hadn’t done that ever before – would cause Marvolo to reject him, equally publicly.

Before those worries could take root and start to fester, Marvolo’s arms had come up and hugged Harry back. “I’m glad to see you, too.” Then he started to hiss, most likely impossible to hear for anyone but Harry. :

―I guess Marcus is influencing you, Harry. Only to be clear about that: I don’t object when Marcus calls me Dad, and I won’t object should you wish to do so:."

Hissing back a quiet :

―Thanks:. Harry was fiercely glad that he had his face buried in Marvolo’s shoulder, effectively hiding it and his bright blush from the other students.

When they both stepped back from their embrace, the others who were waiting had moved so that a respectful circle was cleared around them.

Narrowing his eyes, Harry looked up to Marvolo – it wasn’t that much of a distance any longer – and sharply said, “You didn’t tell me you would be here today!” And Marvolo hadn’t, even though they had spoken via the mirror the evening before, as they did every night.

“That’s true,” Marvolo was grinning when he answered. “I didn’t want to distract you. But as you surely remember, I need to gain my OWLs and NEWTs again. And as this is the earliest date that exams are offered this summer, I asked if I might take a few exams at Hogwarts.” He shrugged.
clearly delighted with surprising Harry. “I was given permission and will take my Charms OWL exam today, together with you and your classmates.”

“Won’t that be strange, though?” Harry couldn’t help but ask.

“What exactly should be strange?” Marvolo wanted to know, looking totally at ease.

“Taking the exams here, with the students, all so much younger…” Harry trailed off, thinking that maybe it was more strange for him to have his father here taking exams at the same time as him.

“I have no idea. Can’t be much stranger than my life has been for almost a year now. I’m certainly glad to have the opportunity.” Marvolo didn’t give anything away, but Harry was pretty sure that the other was thinking about all the changes they had lived through together. And how little Professor Dumbledore’s attempts to hinder him had actually accomplished.

“So you’ve been learning in secret?” Better not to get distracted with the philosophy and morals of second chances.

“More or less,” Marvolo confirmed. “I brushed up on the theory, and a few of the charms I don’t regularly use, like those that make seemingly random objects dance, or otherwise behave in unexpected ways. But most of the material isn’t something uncommon. I use a lot of it on a regular basis.”

That made more than a little bit of sense, so Harry only nodded, and asked after what Marcus had thought about Marvolo going to take exams during the day.

This way the time until they were called back into the Great Hall went by pretty fast. The group of nervous fifth and sixth-year students, and one adult, marched into a Great Hall transformed almost as radically as it had been for the Yule Ball during the blasted tournament.

The four big house tables were gone. Instead of them, neat rows of single desks and chairs had been arranged to face towards the teachers’ table where Professor Flitwick was standing, grinning from ear to ear, waving them in to take a seat. “Come in, come in! Ah, Lord Slytherin! Be so kind and take a seat up front here, right by my side.”

Marvolo gave Harry a wink before doing as he had been instructed, elegantly sitting down in his chair at his desk.

Harry selected a chair at random, not near Hermione, and sat down, looking at the back of the stack of parchment pieces waiting for him. There also was a quill – as Hermione had insisted on telling them repeatedly, spelled against many common ways to cheat – and a glass of fine black ink – another thing provided and spelled to prevent attempts to cheat – waiting for him to write.

Picking up the quill, Harry checked to make sure it was cut well. It would be a disaster should he get points taken from his results because the examiners couldn’t read what he was about to write.

“I would like to remind you all that cheating is not permitted and will result in you failing the exam, and being made to leave on the spot,” Flitwick spoke out loud, drawing the attention of all students sitting tensely in their chairs. “You have time until the sand runs out.” He turned a fairly big and embellished hourglass – the wood was carved – over so the sand started to run. “You may start now.”

Harry turned his stack of parchment over and reached for the ink to unscrew the lid. A few seats over, Hermione was already furiously scribbling onto her own exam sheets.
With a last bracing breath, Harry looked down at the first piece of parchment and the first question – only barely noticing that the paper was clearly labelled with his full name, Henry James Slytherin-Potter – and read it.

1. Name the incantation,

2. and describe the wand motion of the charm used to let objects fly.

Clearly remembering Ron’s voice calling out Wingardium Leviosa, sending the troll’s club flying only to knock the big beast – were they classified as beasts? He would have to check before the Care of Magical Creatures exam – moments later, Harry started to write down this first answer.

Maybe this wasn’t going to be quite as bad as he had feared when he had heard all those admonishments about the importance of OWLs and how hard they were.

ooOoo

Draco looked on in disbelief as Lord Slytherin – the Dark Lord – sat down at the Slytherin House table right next to Harry, reaching for a plate of neatly cut triangle sandwiches as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Carefully selecting his own lunch, Draco kept the odd pair of wizards in his peripheral vision at all times. He hadn’t forgotten the one time he had spied on the Dark Lord getting angry at one of his Death Eaters for not doing as she had been told, and had cast a Cruciatux curse on the woman – Alecto Carrow – as if it was nothing.

While it probably was safe here surrounded by so many people as they currently were, Draco couldn’t quite shake the uneasiness he had around the Dark Lord.

Across from him sat Theo, who met Draco’s eyes without flinching, clearly as surprised that Lord Slytherin would sit with the students rather than the professors.

Or maybe not as surprised as Draco had thought. Because just a moment later Theo spoke up. “Could you please pass the fruits, sir?” clearly addressing the very same man most of the table was too scared to properly acknowledge.

But then the Dark Lord had spent a lot of the summer holidays at Nott’s home.

“Certainly, Mr. Nott,” the Dark Lord answered, wandlessly levitating the plate Theo had asked for, moving it effortlessly across the table. When Theo had accepted the plate with fresh fruits of the season, the Dark Lord turned back to Harry, continuing the lively discussion they seemed to be having about the exam they all had just taken.

And wasn’t that mind-boggling? The Dark Lord taking his OWLs with normal students at Hogwarts!

“Which other exams will you be taking?” Harry asked of the wizard sitting next to him, leaving off
all titles. Draco felt the hairs on his arms rising. He never would dare be this disrespectful to his father in public, even knowing that, at most, he would suffer from a week not being allowed to go flying during the summer.

“‘You know that I already took Transfiguration last summer,’” Lord Slytherin simply answered between sips from his goblet filled with the sweetest juice their table had to offer. “‘I have decided to take Defence, Runes, Potions, and History with you all this year.’” Draco felt like he had to keep from laughing out of disbelief as the Dark Lord counted the exams he was planning to take in the order they would have to take them, on his fingers.

Would the man be eating with them all those days?

“No interest in attending the Herbology practical?” Harry asked with a teasing grin that made Draco’s heart race in worry.

But the Dark Lord only snorted, giving his son an exasperated look. “I’m merrily prioritising the subjects I’ll be needing most. I fully intend to strive for even better results than the first time around, in all the subjects I took when I was your age.”

Draco tried to concentrate on his own food, and the upcoming practical exam in Charms, rather than let himself be rattled by the odd family dynamics – because what else could it be? – between the Slytherins sitting only a few places over from him.

Maybe by the end of these exams he would be able to pretend to be at ease just as convincingly as Theo was doing.

One could hope.

Chapter End Notes

Inspiration for the art-cleaning scene taken from the really wonderful videos from Baumgardner Restorations on youtube (there's a new one today!). I tried to stay vague and would advise: if you have some real art to get repaired or cleaned, take it to an expert!

For the exam part I got out my own copy of book five (in German) and had a look at what was written there. So if you recognise something, that isn’t totally by chance, but also not connected to me copying word for word from the original.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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First Week of OWLs

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your lovely comments and reviews, they have helped me keep writing even as I was melting at my computer. While this summer isn’t as dry as the last, it somehow feels warmer, making writing not always an easy task.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday, 3rd of June 1996

Everyone not going to take exams in the morning had left the common room early, or was doing something quiet, and the fifth- and seventh-years were trying to relax.

Harry was sitting in front of the main fireplace, on the ground – and the place he usually sat in was empty which made Harry roll his eyes mentally – playing a game of chess against Theo. Pansy’s cat had placed herself between them and the fire, obviously luxuriating in the heat, purring a rumbling purr loud enough to be heard from where Harry was sitting tailor fashion.

Harry wondered for a moment what the rest of the Slytherins would have to say if Nagini had insisted on accompanying Marvolo and then had decided to stay with Harry. She would be sprawled out in front of the fire just like Pansy’s familiar now was.

Draco sighed in a rather dramatic fashion, closing his book on transfiguration theory with enough force to make a sound, and then moved to sit beside Theo and Harry, as if to watch Harry being trounced in chess. He had gotten better, but not good enough to actually win.

“You’re really bad at this,” Draco stated after one of Harry’s towers had been split in two.

Harry turned a little so he could look at the blond and noticed that he had some colour again. Maybe relaxing had helped with the stress of the first OWL exam. “You don’t say,” he said, grinning when his sarcasm startled Theo to chuckle. “It’s fun anyway.” And it was.

Draco shook his head, and seemed to relax even more. Harry wasn’t really sure how they would survive two weeks of exams every day.

“Chess isn’t the only thing you’re bad at, is it, Potter?” Adrian Pucey snidely said from where he and his friends were sitting around one of the other tables by one of the big windows into the lake. “Still a little boy, crying for his daddy?” A few people chuckled at that pretty petty taunt, but Harry just sighed, rolling his eyes at Theo.

Who looked a little concerned, and worried. And of course Harry knew why. He had had enough lessons in politics, enough experience with bullies, to know that he couldn’t ignore this, and that his reaction and response needed to be just right, if he wanted to nip this in the bud.

So Harry didn’t turn around, but contemplated the board, when he answered to the taunt. “I’m sorry that your family is so distant that you wouldn’t embrace your father when seeing him the first time in person after he almost died.” Not that Marvolo could actually die at the moment, it still would
be a big problem if his body was too severely harmed, and almost no one knew of his current immortality anyway. “You might want to work on that instead of trying to make me look bad so no one will look too closely at you.” Harry tried hard to sound unconcerned and to hold a relaxed posture. It wouldn’t do to seem tense or bothered, as that would undermine what he tried to present here.

This play-acting was uncomfortably close to what he had needed to do to get by at the Dursleys and primary school without too much trouble, and he would have gladly done without it. But it also was something that was important in politics.

And if Mrs. Goyle hadn’t helped him to realise that there was absolutely nothing wrong with being happy about being cared for, and enjoying that, or with expressing his feelings. Harry hadn’t planned that outburst in front of everyone – lifelong conditioning wasn’t something easily broken – but now that it had happened he wasn’t really unhappy that it had. Drawing the strength to stand by that display from Mrs. Goyle’s words seemed to work quite well so far.

“I think you simply have no sense of decorum!” Pucey tried once more, still going for disdain in his tone. “Can’t even address your father right in public.”

Well that was a weak attempt, and Harry felt his brow wing up at that accusation.

No decorum?

“You seriously think that my father would have sat with us at the students’ table if he wanted the meal to be formal?” Harry couldn’t keep his voice from sounding astonished because why would an adult actually chose to sit with the students if they weren’t interested in keeping it formal?

“Really.” And with that Harry turned back to the chessboard – when had he looked up towards where Pucey and the others were sitting? – dismissing the others, and actually ending that dangerous conversation to Harry’s own surprise.

ooOoo

“And he really tried to call you out for lack of decorum?” Marvolo asked, even as Harry had already explained that that was exactly what had happened.

Just like any other day since Marvolo had sent the mirror to Harry, they were talking. This time while sitting on their respective beds, ready to go to sleep.

“He did. And now that I think about it, as much as I enjoyed you sitting with us, I have a feeling the others didn’t as much.” Harry looked chagrinned and tired, and Marvolo tried really hard not to smile. That would probably send the wrong message. How would a teenager react if he was called adorable?

“I can sit with the professors on Thursday when I’m back again for the Defence exam. If you prefer.” Marvolo offered, quite aware how much discomfort his presence at the Slytherin table during lunch had caused. In fact he had been really entertained by how much the young Malfoy had tried to keep his composure and how entertained the young Nott had been by that as well.

His son sighed. “I guess.” And wasn’t that hint of unhappiness flattering? His son wanted to eat lunch with him even when all his friends were there as well.
Should he be worried about that? Wasn’t happiness caused by someone’s unhappiness something bad?

“Do you feel prepared for your Transfiguration exam tomorrow?” Best change the topic of their conversation before the ground could get any more treacherous.

“I guess.” Harry moved his hand through his hair, catching his glasses and pulling them askew. With an annoyed sigh Harry righted the glasses again. “At least I did what I could in revision, I did pretty well in my last essays and the practical work wasn’t too bad.”

“So basically keep a cool head and you should at least manage an acceptable?” Marvolo cut Harry off before he could start to ramble and talk himself into a state. Even all this time later Marvolo still could remember quite clearly all the hysterics his fellow students had managed to talk themselves into when he had taken his OWLs and the years after when he had been Prefect and Head Boy.

“Yeah. Basically.” Harry was rolling his eyes now, clearly saying without words that keeping a clear head in this instance wasn’t all that easy.

“Go to sleep.” Marvolo said feeling quite fond of his son. “You’ll need it tomorrow.”

“Have fun catching up with your paperwork tomorrow.” Harry said with a grin, obviously teasing, before taking off his glasses. “Sweet dreams.”

“Sweet dreams, Harry.” They ended the call and Marvolo reached for the book he was currently reading. A book he was skimming to see if he could lend it to Bill’s colleague or if there was something too questionable in there. He was pretty sure the curse-breakers were mostly pretty happy to read books that contained magic that was currently considered illegal, but there was other magic that had been considered questionable for far longer than any laws regulating what could and couldn’t be used had been around. Better make sure to only give out books that were not that questionable.

Sadly this project would be mostly on the back burner for him until the exams were done with. It was an interesting one, and not something he had bothered with before. But he was certain it was worthwhile.

It was far later than he had wanted it to be when he finally doused the lights and went to sleep.

oooOOooo

Tuesday, 4th of June 1996

It was lunch break, and Harry was sitting with Luna, gratefully hiding behind her request that her boyfriend sit with her. Because Hermione had looked like she wanted to ask him to sit with them at the Gryffindor table, and there was a lot of tension there.

“Do you feel the exam went well?” Luna asked from where she was lazily mixing her mashed carrots into her mashed potatoes.
“I guess.” Harry slowly answered, taking a sip from the cold tea with honey he had mixed up. “At first I couldn’t remember the definition of a switching spell. Not sure that what I wrote is close enough to the actual definition, but... well. The rest of the questions weren’t really easy, but at least I was able to write something for all of them.” He shrugged and felt himself smile in response to Luna’s serene expression of happiness. “We’ll see when the results come in the summer.” Another thing in which OWLs differed from the exams Harry had taken until now. While all other exams – except NEWTs of course – were marked by the Professors and announced before the students left for the holidays, these were marked by Ministry employees and the results were sent out by owl during the summer holidays.

“Have you made plans for the summer?” Harry asked, because he would love to visit with Luna and his friends this summer. Finally it was possible, with him no longer stuck with the Dursleys, for friends to come visit and for him to visit his friends. And for more than a week or two at the end of summer.

“Dad and I want to go on an expedition for part of the summer. We haven’t decided on a place yet. Maybe Burma, or New Zealand.” And from there Luna went on to describe all the different magical creatures supposedly native to those places which she and her father would try to find for the Quibbler and their loyal audience.

“Do you know when you’ll go? Because I really would love to visit you at home, maybe go to Diagon Alley together.” It felt a little like when he had asked her out for Valentine's Day. He was all nervous and hopeful.

“That’s a delightful idea!” Luna moved her hand to take Harry’s and leaned into him until her head rested on his shoulder. An older Ravenclaw on the other side of the table – probably sitting with them because there was more space at this section of table – rolled her eyes but refrained from commenting, for which Harry was grateful. “I would love to go out to eat ice cream with you and the others. I like having friends.”

And there was one of those open and blunt statements Luna tended to make at the oddest of times. She was right of course, but her bluntness made others uncomfortable, as Harry had witnessed more than once this year, and people tended to get nasty if someone made them confront uncomfortable truths.

“Friends are great!” Harry agreed because it was true and this year had expanded that group of people Harry could name as friends by a lot.

ooOoo

After lunch they all were herded back into the chamber they had waited in before they had been sorted back before first year and then again yesterday before their Charms practical.

Harry expected that they would be called in alphabetical order in small groups just like the day before. He was sure this would get old pretty fast. Because of his change in last name from Potter to Slytherin – as far as the school was concerned – he now came even farther down the list.

But no. The first group called was “Turpin, Lisa. Goyle, Gregory. Bones, Susan. Patil, Parvati” so it looked like Harry’s fear was unfounded and the examiners had actually thought about the dread of always having to wait for last.
But just like yesterday the students who were finished didn’t return.

Probably another safety measure to reduce attempts at cheating.

Harry was occluding most of his waiting time in an attempt to keep calm and not listen to some of the others panicking in the various corners of the room.

“Slytherin, Henry. Abbott, Hannah. Thomas, Dean. Finch-Fletchley, Justin.” The replacement professor’s voice startled Harry out of his concentrated calm, and he followed the others out of the waiting room, through the hall and into the Great Hall. Once again the big tables had been removed, replaced with several stations – composed of rugs marking an area, and a table and chair set – with a waiting examiner at each station.

“You’ll go to Professor Tofty, Mr. Slytherin.” And that Harry did.

“Welcome Mr. Slytherin.” The kindly looking, ancient, wizard said with a smile. “I hope you feel up to showing off a little for me.”

Despite his nervousness Harry had to smile at that.

The voice of Professor Tofty was kind of funny as he waved at the table and an iguana sitting on it, blinking lazily. “I would like for you to vanish that iguana, Mr. Slytherin. For a start, if you would?”

“Sure.” The vanishing spell. Harry had practiced that one until he couldn’t stand it any more. So with confidence he got his wand out, moved so he had a good angle to aim at the reptile, and called the wand movement and incantation to mind.

Then Harry moved his wand and spoke the incantation and felt instant relief the moment the iguana vanished from sight.

“Well done, Mr. Slytherin.” Professor Tofty said. “Let’s move on to…”

A shriek and the sound of many large birds trying to take off in panic interrupted the professor, and made Harry turn and duck on instinct. Panicked animals never were anything good.

“Miss Abbott! How did you manage that? Halt! Everyone halt and take cover!” The witch testing Hannah over at the next table called out. “We’ll pause the exam while we catch and remove those flamingos.”

And the examiners, together with the new Transfiguration Professor, who had taught them since Professor McGonagall had become Headmistress, started to do just that, and Harry carefully moved out of the way towards the wall behind his testing station to take cover as instructed.

“What did you do?” Harry just had to ask when a beet-red Hannah came to stand next to him.

“I don’t know!” She wailed at a hushed volume – an expressive feat in Harry’s opinion – “I was instructed to transfigure that poor ferret and then suddenly there were all those birds!”

It took almost ten minutes for all the birds to be caught and brought out of the hall, and the whole time Harry was watching the adults’ attempts valiantly holding in his laughter.

When he finally left the Great Hall Harry felt that he had done pretty well. And then he went to start on some last Herbology revision before tomorrow’s exam.
When Bill walked into the library on the second floor, led there by a house elf, Marvolo was sitting in a comfortable reading chair, and the young boy Marcus was sitting on the floor — on a rug if Bill could trust his eyes, which he usually could — colouring vigorously on a piece of paper.

It was such a sweet homely scene.

His mother never would believe it if Bill told her. Which he wouldn’t, because everyone was much happier with her not being reminded of the terrible situation, as she termed it whenever there was an article in the Prophet or Witch Weekly. Dad had complained more than once when mum wasn’t near that she obsessed too much. After all, after this many months it was pretty clear there was no need to worry. Or so Arthur said.

Bill knew that there was no need to worry, and still felt that that approach to decide if something was wrong or not was not the best.

The elf popped out of the room, and Marvolo looked up from his book, smiling a little and waving at another chair nearby as he spotted Bill. “Come in and sit down.”

“Do your elves not get along?” Bill just had to ask, while walking over to the chair to sit down, because the display when he had entered the house had been hilarious.

“Why do you ask?” Marvolo closed the book and turned a little so they were more comfortably seated for a discussion and had a look about him that reminded Bill of the twins.

“Because they almost started a fistfight over who would be allowed to take me up here. And you know about that.” At the end of that statement Bill narrowed his eyes because he knew he was right.

Marvolo grinned and smiled. “True. The two of them have distinct areas of responsibility. It’s an effort to make sure both of them have enough work.” Marvolo added to Bill’s questioning look. “And as you are both my guest — and everything regarding me is Henbane’s domain — and visiting here — this house being Flimm’s domain along with the children — they probably weren’t sure how to decide which of them was responsible for taking care of you because of those conflicting possible interpretations of the situation.” Marvolo sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I have to say negotiating between those two is more challenging than some other interests I had to bring together.”

A few interesting possible scenarios flashed through Bill’s mind at that proclamation, and then he wrenched his mind away from that to return to the reason he was here. “Did you find books that could help?” Marvolo had tentatively agreed to sponsor the investigation and research Brown was wishing to do when Bill had sent a letter inquiring.

“I have found a few books, but they contain more than only information pertaining to the topic. So before I can hand them over, I’ll have to make sure they are actually safe for someone else to handle.” Bill’s eyes fell on the book in Marvolo’s lap when he waved at it. And the reference was clear enough. Old families often put curses on books to make sure they couldn’t be stolen or read by those not of the family. It was paramount to make sure a book was safe before lending it out.

“Might Mr. Brown be willing to meet?” Marvolo asked, letting the book float from his hand over to
a small desk – where a stack of others was already sitting – without even looking.

“I guess he wouldn’t be opposed on principle.” Bill wasn’t actually sure where Brown stood considering politics. Or what the man’s stance on magic considered dangerous actually was in detail. As Brown was a curse-breaker he probably had a similar basic interest in the more dangerous side of magics, just like Bill had. But if Brown was willing to just accept some other things as there but not used if it was in one of the books… that was the bigger question.

And probably the reason Marvolo was asking for a meeting.

His eyes wandering to look at where the boy was turning his head this way and that, getting different angles while he inspected his work, before picking up a red pencil to start up again. With the child here Bill felt a little restricted in what he could say. But he remembered well enough how nice it had been to be included when the grown ups were talking, that he didn’t want to ask Marvolo to send the boy away either.

He decided to pick his words carefully. “If you want to see if Brown is the right wizard to lead that research, and if you can work with him, I’m sure he’ll agree to a meeting.”

Marvolo nodded. “I think a meeting would be good before I hand over any books for him to work with. I trust your assessment of his skill, but I need to see if I can trust him to handle books belonging to the Potter family.”

Bill nodded, registering that Marvolo spoke of books belonging to the Potter family, and also realizing that there probably weren’t that many Slytherin assets left. After all, the family had been pretty much vanished from the stage of politics and society for many generations.

“I’ll try to arrange something.” Bill agreed. “What were you reading last?”

And from there they descended into a lively discussion about different spells used to detect poison, and curses that were intended to prevent antivenin and antitoxin from working, until it was time for dinner.

Bill went home his mind buzzing with new ideas.

oooOOooo

Wednesday, 5th of June 1996

Today they had had their Herbology exam. Theo had seen Draco’s relief at another day devoid of the Dark Lord’s presence, taking his OWLs alongside them all. It had been plain as the sun shining down on them while they waited outside the greenhouses, and had been highly amusing.

Now after everyone had taken a shower – setting plants into new pots, selecting the right fertilizer from a broad selection, and that all in an early summer heat, hadn’t let them stay clean – they were sitting in their common room, resting a little before they would take up their revision materials once again.

If the OWLs were already this exhausting, how bad were the NEWTs which had nasty, exhausting
in their name?

Harry was sketching something, one finger of his left hand wrapped in a small bandage. “Say Harry, what happened with your hand?” Theo hadn’t seen the bandage before now and was curious.

“That was a fanged geranium, nasty little bugger. And ungrateful, too! It has a much nicer pot now,” Harry answered without looking up from his sketch.

People close enough to hear chuckled or laughed outright. Theo was shaking his head, smiling. “I don’t think they’re intelligent enough to understand what you were doing, Harry.”

“Probably.” Harry agreed, and turned his sketch so Theo could see it. “Doesn’t change that the ungrateful thing bit me.”

Theo smothered his laughter at seeing the sketch. Harry had sketched a few slugs advancing on a fanged geranium, which seemed to be trembling in fear. It was not the usual realistic style Harry went for, but more in the art of the occasionally appearing political caricature.

“No! Tabitha, I just know I did badly! My parents will send me to Durmstrang, or maybe even take my wand from me!” A girl suddenly started to yell at the top of her lungs, her voice breaking with the distinct quality of someone who had a head-cold, or had been crying.

Theo looked around and noticed Draco and Harry do the same. He himself was only curious to see what was happening, but Theo knew that Draco, as a prefect, and Harry, as the Slytherin Heir, looked because they felt and were obligated to do something about a small girl panicking.

Over in one of the corner seating groups used by the younger-years – closer to the entrance and without a good look over the main pathways through the common room – a small girl with two pigtails of dark hair – Theo couldn't really tell if it was black or brown – was standing, her face blotchy and her eyes red. She was hiccuping, and had tears running down her face. Another girl was trying to console her, without much success.

“Draco, go fetch the Professor,” Harry ordered in a low voice, setting down his sketching material, and not looking back to see if Draco did as told, as he got up from his seat and walked over.

As Theo knew he would, Draco was gone almost as fast as Harry, but Theo stayed where he was, keeping an eye on Harry’s things, and watching how Harry approached the girls, addressing the one who wasn't crying first.

“Miss Smith, may I sit with you and your friends?” Harry didn’t really let them refuse and soon was sitting with the first-year girls, regaling them with a funny story as far as Theo could tell, bridging the time it would take Professor Snape to make it to them.

It didn’t take long for Draco to return with the Professor walking past the prefect to where the girls were sitting. Theo saw the distinct colour of a calming draught in the potions phial the man was holding loosely in his hand.

Well that probably would be sorted out soon. Picking up the novel he had been reading – recommended to him by Ginny – Theo returned his attention to the text, only to be distracted once again when Harry sat down in his armchair with a huff.

Theo looked up and raised his brows in an unspoken question, which Harry understood without problems.
“She’s worried about how her parents will react if she doesn’t manage to meet their standard. No
idea if her worries are founded in something close to reality. But I think she now knows that she’s
not alone. If she needs help she’ll get it.” Harry spoke in an almost-whisper, making sure his voice
wouldn’t carry.

Theo nodded. It was curious how protective Harry seemed of the younger Slytherin students. Had
he always been that way? Theo wasn’t sure.

“Let’s go up and have dinner, Harry.” Theo decided, sure his friend would try to skip the meal, too
nervous about the Defence exam the next day, to really have much of an appetite. “And don’t pull
that face. You know that Professor Snape has no qualms about feeding you more nutrition potion if
you don’t show up at meals and eat something.”

Harry snorted and gathered his things to return them to his room. “Meet at the door in ten
minutes?”

Theo nodded in agreement and stood to return the book to his dorm as well.

oooOOooo

Thursday, 6th of June 1996

During lunch Marvolo sat down at the teachers table with a wink at Harry, who rolled his eyes but
smiled. As fun as it was to sit with his son at the Slytherin table, he really shouldn’t put that much
strain on the students taking their exams.

Severus was sitting rather far away next to his wife, and in general Marvolo got the impression that
the whole usual seating order had been shuffled around. There were quite a few reasons why that
might have happened, but the most likely – at least in his mind – was that the Headmistress had
wanted to keep him close. She had been a close confidant of the old meddler Dumbledore, after all.

Food appeared on the table, and Marvolo eyed the offered possibilities with interest before he
picked up a platter to scoop some shepherd’s pie onto his plate.

“How was the exam, Lord Slytherin?” Headmistress McGonagall started a conversation, placing
mostly meat on her own plate.

“Different.” Marvolo answered, thinking back to the written exam he had taken that morning. “I’m
not sure why exactly it’s so different now. But I guess the motivation that let to Madame Umbridge
being sent here to teach. Or the spotty education over the whole schooling of this year’s students
taking their OWLs.” And he really needed to take down that curse for good, as abysmal as the
current Professor was, Marvolo couldn’t in good conscience leave the curse where it was.

“So you felt it was easier?” The Headmistress asked in follow-up.

“It was.” Marvolo nodded, not really eager to get into a deep conversation with her. Maybe he
should eat down in the village or risk the marks of the other Slytherin students by sitting with
Harry again tomorrow.
“Could it be that you simply have more experience now, Lord Slytherin?” The man sitting at his other side interjected, surprising Marvolo a bit.

Harry, obviously, had told him about the Squib who was taking care of all the paintings inside the castle and that Mr. Filch had offered advice to him, but that had been all he had learned so far about the man.

Inclining his head in concession, Marvolo had to agree. “That’s possible. Despite the fact that this body is not yet a year old, my mind had much more time to absorb knowledge compared to my fifteen year old self back when I took these exams for the first time.” In fact most of the time Marvolo had studied for these exams had been dedicated to making sure he knew which main points were expected of him to know. Most questions were easy, but the more open-ended ones could go badly if he failed to write the things expected because he concentrated on entirely the wrong topic.

Time for a change in topic. “My son tells me that you have allowed him to watch your work on one of the paintings, Mr. Filch. I wanted to thank you for that. Harry has developed a big interest in art. Getting to see a master conservator at work is a unique opportunity.”

Argus Filch hummed and then showed his yellowed teeth in a big grin. “It was no hardship. He’s a polite lad. And has real interest, a good eye as well. There aren’t that many wizards or witches with talent, interest, and the determination to see it through.” Filch cut into his sausage with fervour. “Something like that needs to be encouraged.”

“I didn’t know that you had a Mastery, Mr. Filch.” The Headmistress leant forward in her seat so she could see past Marvolo to Filch, interest clear in her voice, and steam from a bowl of peas clouding her glasses. “Why isn’t it noted in your file?”

Filch snorted. “That’s because I don’t hold a magical Mastery, Headmistress. Lord Slytherin was being polite.”

Now it was Marvolo who made a small unhappy noise. “I don’t know about me only saying such to be polite.” Really he hadn’t said that just to be polite. “You finished a long and rigorous education in art. It might have been at a muggle university, but that doesn’t change the level of time, dedication, and skill needed to attain it. The closest we have in the magical world is a Mastery.” Marvolo had spent some time researching muggle opportunities in art. For Harry, and because he had been curious.

“Still.” Filch said with bitterness in his voice, implying with his tone if not his words, that he didn’t agree. “There is no real way to get a muggle degree accepted by the Ministry, or most employers.”

“Do you feel able to teach?” The Headmistress asked seemingly out of the blue. But when Marvolo turned to look at her he saw a calculating gleam in her eyes.

“Teach? Those hooligans?” Filch clearly was more than skeptical. “I doubt they even would want to learn.”

“Harry certainly would enjoy the possibility to learn more than he can from books and experimentation.” Marvolo just had to interject, as securing such an opportunity for his son would be great.

Filch snorted again. “The Board never will allow a class for only one student.”

“Let the board be my problem.” McGonagall said with more force in her voice than Marvolo had
expected from her, most of the time she seemed so mild-mannered. “And as it clearly would be an elective, we could make it span all years, and you would get to decide who can take the class and what to teach your students.” She seemed to warm to the topic, and more of the people seated at the head table turned their attention to their conversation. “And if you say you will only take two students at a time, that would be fine by me. I would love to expand the opportunities offered here at Hogwarts.”

An art class at Hogwarts. Marvolo was pretty sure that there hadn’t been something like that in a long time. But he guessed that might have been different when the school had been founded. Hadn’t it been a place to learn all kind of things?

“I’ll guess I’ll have to think on that.” Filch sounded cautious, and Marvolo didn’t blame him. Teaching wasn’t for everyone, and Severus was a prime example that passion for a subject didn’t automatically qualify someone to teach said subject.

The meal was over pretty soon after that, and Marvolo had to wait with all the others to be called in for the practical exam.

ooOoo

Lord Slytherin and his son and heir were called into the Hall at the same time. they had decided by lot who would get to examine them and had timed the moment to call them both carefully.

“Welcome, Lord Slytherin.” Tobias greeted the wizard with a smile, feeling quite giddy.

The wizard turned from where he had been looking after where his son had gone and almost visibly concentrated on his own exam. “Nice to see you again, Professor Tofty.”

As usual the man was politeness personified, and Tobias felt himself smile. “Let’s start with something easy first, shall we?” It was almost a joke that this man had to re-take his OWLs but Tobias supposed that there were rules to follow. “Please cast a shield charm for me.”

Lord Slytherin smiled. “I guess a protego is enough? Verbal?”

Chuckling, Tobias nodded. “If you would be so kind.”

With a hint of a bow from the neck, Lord Slytherin produced his wand – it was an odd feeling seeing that iconic wand up close – and expertly executed the movement and incantation to create a shield of shimmering, translucent blue energy in front of him.

Tobias clapped. “Well done!” Then he waved a hand at the dummy at his testing station, one of the rougher self-assembling ones they always used when a spell needed to be cast on a person and was destructive, or dangerous when miscast. “And now a stunner, please.”

This went on for some time, Lord Slytherin sometimes asking for confirmation when Tobias asked for a spell that belonged to a group of spells normal students taking their OWLs would only have learned one of. It amused Tobias to no end.

Floating a chest out from under the table, Tobias smiled and placed it down carefully. “And for the finish, I would like you to face this boggart.” Some thought it wasn’t a true test of capability that he announced that there was a boggart inside the chest. But Tobias was of the opinion that as he
couldn’t know the deepest fears of the students he was testing, it was the height of stupidity to not give them a moments warning to prepare themselves. He didn’t want to see if they would survive a potentially deadly situation with no preparation. He only wanted to see if they knew the spell, what a boggart was, and how to go about banishing the pest. “I do ask you not to kill it.”

Curiously, Lord Slytherin suddenly was much paler, but nodded so that Tobias stepped back – so as not to confuse the boggart – and flicked his wand to open the chest.

Out came a startlingly accurate replica of the young Mr. Slytherin-Potter hissing with a derisive expression on his face.

Was the boggart speaking Parseltongue?

“Riddikulus!” There was a puff sound and suddenly the replica of the boy was on the ground laughing and squirming, a big snake on top of him, with the head right up in the boy’s face, seemingly tickling him with his tongue.

“Well done!” Tobias stepped in, banishing the boggart back into the chest. That had looked like it was a rather severe fear. It happened from time to time when someone older, or with more of a past, came to be in front of them for their exams, that someone had a deeper fear than the usual. This seemed to be a rather personal one, and that was reason enough not to draw too much attention to it.

“You can go!” Lord Slytherin placed his wand away and left with a greeting, waiting at the door for his son to catch up, who had finished almost at the same time.

Tobias meanwhile turned to his notes, marking full points before turning towards the next student he would have to test. These weeks were getting harder on him.

ooOoo

Harry arrived at the doors from the Great Hall to the Entrance Hall just a moment after his father, feeling quite happy with his practical exam in Defence. But that happy bubble quickly burst when he saw how shaken and pale his father was.

“Are you okay?” Harry just had to ask, reaching out to lay a hand on his father’s arm in an attempt to offer comfort.

“Not really. But it’ll pass.” Marvolo attempted a shaky smile, and visibly pulled himself together probably employing Occlumency to do so.

Harry wasn’t really convinced – Marvolo wasn’t normally someone who showed so openly when he wasn’t feeling his best – but followed his father out of the Great Hall, the ceiling hinting at the clear, sunny weather outside, and down to the shore of the lake to a shaded spot near a few trees.

A few flicks of both their wands they had a sturdy blanket to sit on, as well as spells surrounding the place to keep away others, who might try to listen in on their conversation.

It took a few moments more – which Harry waited through more or less patiently – before Marvolo started to speak.
With his face turned out towards the lake, speaking slowly and deliberately, Marvolo explained his state. “The exam went well, but the last task was to demonstrate how to handle a boggart.” Harry felt his stomach tie itself into knots, he was glad that he hadn’t had to face a boggart himself. “In the past, for the longest time, it had been my own corpse. But sometime after I regained a body it changed.”

Harry was tempted to ask what it was now, he hadn’t noticed what Marvolo had done during his exam, concentrating much too hard on doing well in his own, but knew that it would an incredibly insensitive thing to do.

“This wasn’t the first time I encountered a boggart, obviously, as there was a severe infestation in your godfather’s summer house, but…” Marvolo took a deep breath, picking up a small stone and tossing it into the lake. “It’s still so much more disconcerting than seeing my own corpse.”

Nibbling on his lip, Harry tried to decide what to do now. He didn’t want to ask what his father feared the most, so he probably should change the topic. “It looked like you had a lively discussion up at the head table during lunch.”

Marvolo snorted, tension leaving his shoulders. “That we did. I still wonder why the Headmistress decided to place me between herself and Mr. Filch. It seems as if the Headmistress is contemplating expanding the offered classes at Hogwarts. She actually asked if Mr. Filch would consider teaching an elective art class.”

Suddenly eager to hear more, Harry moved closer and leaned forward. “Art? In what form? Did he agree?”

Now Marvolo chuckled, relaxing even more, his legs stretched out before him, leaned back on his elbows, enjoying the nice weather. “He wasn’t all that keen on teaching teenagers.” The way he said that made Harry think that that hadn’t been the word used. “But the Headmistress was eager to assure him that it could be a year-spanning class, as small as he wished it to be. That he could set the requirements to be admitted to the class. I think he’ll consider it.”

“That’s great!” Harry wasn’t sure he would be able to qualify for an art class, but then there was also the fact that Mr. Filch had invited him into his workroom and had him let watch the man work. So maybe it was possible after all. “I certainly would like to be a part of that.”

“I thought as much.” Marvolo said, nodding. “Let’s wait here until your classmates are all finished?”

“Yeah.” Harry sighed and made himself comfortable. Spending the rest of the afternoon here, relaxing would be great.

After dinner he planned to do some more revision for runes, which he would write tomorrow. But for the moment he would enjoy the sun, the gentle wind, and the singing of the birds in the trees.

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**Friday, 7th of June 1996**
Severus was on his way back from a stroll at the edge of the Forbidden Forest up to the school for breakfast, a small collection of wild flowers bundled in his hand, when he came across his Lord also walking up to the school. “Lord Slytherin.” Severus called out after a moment’s hesitation, drawing the man’s attention.

The Dark Lord turned and adjusted his route so that they would meet a few meters farther down their respective paths, on the gravel road up to the castle. “Lord Prince.” There was a slight grin on the Dark Lord’s face, and Severus didn’t even try not to roll his eyes.

“We’re on school grounds, and you’re here to take OWL exams, Lord Slytherin. So the appropriate title would be Professor Snape.” The many different ways their interactions were dictated by the places they met, or the circumstances of a meeting, were staggering.

The Dark Lord only chuckled. “True enough, Professor Snape. How did the first week of OWL exams go? And NEWTs? Any hysterical breakdowns?”

“Only a few students in need of calming draughts or sleeping potions. Nothing unusual.” Severus considered as they walked on towards the castle in a leisurely pace. “Well, that’s not entirely true. This year we had rather fewer instances of students poisoning themselves with some supposed stimulant or other. Not sure if our new prefects are that much better at confiscating the bogus elixirs and whatnot, or if the Weasley twins’ trade with joke sweets has made the students more cautious in taking things they don’t know well.” In fact it seemed that those pranks had encouraged the students to learn more detection spells and to actually use them before they ate or drank anything.

“Harry has told me a lot about those pranks. Really ingenious inventors those two.” The Dark Lord mused, smiling fondly, something that still felt unsettlingly human for that man.

“They certainly are that.” Severus agreed, because to say otherwise would be to lie, and there was no need for that out here.

They walked a few moments in silence, nearing the castle with each step.

“You’re rather early today, Lord Slytherin.” Severus would rather have stayed silent, but it would be considered rude not to talk with a visiting wizard. And even as Severus would gladly sink to one knee before his Lord out here there wasn’t much between them between Severus being Head of House Slytherin at Hogwarts, the Slytherin Heir’s Head of House, and having his research sponsored by Lord Slytherin. Not quite the same relationship than the one the mark – now hidden and much less obvious – on his arm established.

“Well, yes. Marcus was picked up for school earlier than normal today. They have a project day in the gardens, and started earlier for that. So I wasn’t quite sure what to do with myself. Starting on the mountain of paperwork on my desk wasn’t an appealing prospect, so I decided to take a stroll on the grounds instead.”

Severus had to agree that a stroll over the grounds of Hogwarts was always more pleasant than paperwork. The knowledge that there were several years of potion exams still waiting for him to grade them made a cold shiver run down his spine. “Did your son inform you that he’ll write a rune exam for fourth year today?” More idle conversation, maybe Severus shouldn’t have called out to the man, so they both could have walked in silence.

“He did. And he also advised me to stay away from Miss Granger after the Runes exam, as she tends to rehash the whole exam after it’s done.” The Dark Lord chuckled. “I’m tempted to see if she would be willing to discuss the questions with me. I remember having a similar urge when I
was younger. Less out of insecurity, as it seems to be in her case, but out of a wish to show off.” There was a complicated smile on Lord Slytherin’s face, which Severus decided to decipher later.

“Miss Granger has had contact with quite a few of the Slytherin girls in her year. I think they might have taught her about proper decorum for a young heiress like her,” Severus decided to say. He knew that Lord Slytherin had no interest in girls that young, but still his protective instinct towards his charges reared its head. That sentence could hint at the wrong kind of interest.

The Dark Lord caught on quickly. “No worries, Severus. If she’s willing to talk with me, it most likely will be during the break after the written exam, while the Great Hall is being set back to serve for lunch. There’ll be a lot of witnesses around. I never would dare endanger a young lady’s reputation like that. And especially not my old friend's heiress.”

Now Severus felt uncomfortable for bringing up his worries like that. Not sure what to do about it, and as they had reached the castle entrance, Severus decided to change the topic again. “Will you join us for breakfast, Lord Slytherin?”

“No, please go on without me. I’ll go down to the greenhouses for a moment.”

They exchanged the usual pleasantries, and Severus hurried up to place the flowers into their living room to brighten Sonja’s day, before breakfast would begin in the Great Hall.

The end of the school year always was a stressful time for everyone living at the castle. Summer hopefully would be calmer when they moved to the manor.

Chapter End Notes

That was the first week of OWL exams. Not sure how the timeline works out with all those exams and NEWTs during the same time, but timelines aren't all that refined in the original books anyway. So I try not to worry too much. If you recognize certain elements that's not a coincidence. I got out my copy of the book and had a look. The exams are rather short in the first week, but a few bits I kept.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Carefully setting down his case of correspondence – picked up from the mailbox at the post office in London set to receive mail from the general public – Barty got out his wand to cast the spell that would clear his robes of the soot and remove the wrinkles at the same time.

Travelling by floo was inconvenient at times.

Now soot-free, Barty flicked his wand to float the case – it was heavy – and started to make his way through the house to the office he normally used to presort Lord Slytherin’s mail for the man. There was no need for his Lord to read all the silly proposals from desperate witches and wizards, be it for marriage, no-strings-attached affairs, or business ventures. In fact, when his Lord had become more than annoyed by those kind of letters, Barty had proposed the open mailbox at the post office in Diagon Alley. So far it was working rather well.

A high-pitched laugh, and the sound of the heavy coils of his Lord’s familiar sliding over the ground – he had heard that often enough to recognize it by now – drew his attention to the formal dining room he didn’t usually venture into.

The door wasn’t closed properly so Barty had no trouble peering inside once he drew level with the crack.

Inside was the young boy, Marcus, crawling around on the floor in some rather short casual robes, over trousers and a buttoned shirt, followed by Nagini. For a moment Barty remembered how Nagini had chased and threatened Death Eaters to their Lord’s amusement at meetings in the past. He gripped his wand harder, preparing to cast a shield to keep the kid safe, before he remembered that there was no reason to assume that the boy was in danger.

He had been laughing, and he was the Dark Lord’s son. There was no danger.

With a sigh, Barty conceded to himself that he would have to make sure, if only for his own peace of mind. So he stepped out from behind the door, pushing it open a little more. “Good day, Master Marcus. What are you playing?”

Both child and snake turned so that they could see Barty. Nagini was half under the big table, the boy half hidden by one of the massive chairs.

“Hello, Mr. Barty!” was the sunny greeting he got, accompanied by a few casual tongue-flicks from the snake. “We’re playing ingredients-gathering.”
“Are you looking for something specific?” Barty asked, intrigued. He couldn’t remember ever playing that sort of game. Most of the time it had been either Quidditch, hunting dragons, or tracking down a rogue werewolf.

“Valerian, lavender, and flobber worms.” Marcus listed as if he had learned a list by heart. He probably was talking about flobberworms, which would make a list matching up with bases used for different variants of sleeping draughts. “And maybe some rats, as Nagini would like a snack. Don’t…” and there the sentence morphed into incoherent hissing as the boy turned to look at the snake contentedly coiled up into a heap at his side.

Bemused, Barty watched what looked like a lively back-and-forth between the boy and the snake. As he only could hear one half of the conversation he guessed was happening, he wasn’t actually all that sure. But as there were frequent breaks in the hissing coming from Marcus, it didn’t look as if the boy was talking non-stop.

That parselmouths were able to perceive the language coming from the snake – did they even hiss? Was there actually a sound produced? Or was it all magic? -- had always been kind of an enigma for Barty. Either it was all magic, or Parselmouths actually were born with differences in their anatomy enabling the communication with snakes.

“Can you help?” Barty's musing was cut short by the boy turning back to ask him that question quite earnestly.

“Can I help with what?” Barty had no idea what the snake and boy had spoken about, how should he know what they needed his help with?

“Didn’t you listen?” Marcus sat up more properly on his heels, propping up his arms at his waist, reminding Barty quite a lot of one of his old teachers back when he was learning his letters.

“I’m not a Parselmouth, Master Marcus,” Barty said in the most polite voice he could manage, while also trying not to laugh at the picture the boy was making, “So I couldn’t follow that conversation. IF you could please explain again for me.”

The boy let his arms fall to his sides, the tension and indignation draining away almost instantly. “Oh. Dad said there aren’t that many who can talk with snakes.” Barty almost did a double take, he never would have thought the Dark Lord would allow his son to call him something as disrespectful as dad. “Nagini wanted to know if you might have a snack on you.”

“I don’t think I do. But you could call for a house elf to bring something.” Barty really wasn’t in the habit of carrying dead rodents around in his robe pockets.

The way Marcus started to fidget with the seams of his robes told Barty all he needed to know. “Your father said she can’t get any snacks, didn’t he?” That was such a classical move to get around a decision made by one parent. Ask another adult for permission without telling them of the previous decision made.

Then the embarrassment was gone and Marcus shot Barty a cheeky smirk. “Worth a try!” And off he went, crawling under the table.

Chuckling, Barty went back into the hall, flicked his wand at the case, and finished his walk to the study set aside for him here on the ground floor. Time for some sorting.
Carisma was impressed by how fast her two main patients – that was what she called them in her head, anyway, because they were so very interesting in their dynamic – were making headway into their troubles. That Lord Slytherin had decided to search out help was especially remarkable. If he hadn’t accepted that he needed help, they never would have made it this far.

She watched him put his wand into the small box he had transfigured back when he first came as a patient into her office, sitting in her own chair, Tom on her lap purring gently. It had become kind of a ritual for him to place his main tool and weapon out of easy reach at the beginning of each session.

Carisma had no illusions of how easy it still would be for him to kill her with magic even without his wand. But she was glad he had found a way to put himself into the right mindset for therapy.

She had had other patients with less complicated backgrounds who had a harder time working through their set of problems. But seeing as Marvolo Slytherin had split his very soul into more than two pieces on purpose, there wasn’t much Carisma could think of that was on the same level of complicated.

“How are your exams going?” Carisma asked as a beginning question when her patient had sat down in his own chair, one leg casually crossed over the other, his hands folded in his lap.

“Reasonably well, I would say.” Just knowing that there was more to that, Carisma kept her silence. It had proven to work rather well on Lord Slytherin, even as his smile and the glances he shot her when she left silence for him to fill, implied that he knew full well what she was doing.

And there it was again: that look. “One of the tasks in my Defence practical was to banish a boggart. I assume you know what that is?” She had to give him that he managed not to sound condescending while asking that. Not even her own relatives managed that most of the time.

“A shapeshifting pest, that impersonates the biggest fear of every human it encounters. They live off that fear, though I’m not sure if they’re actually alive, or mere embodiments of energy.” Being tricked to encounter a boggart as a joke by a cousin had led Carisma to look them up and learn what she could to see if there was a way to defend herself. She hadn’t found anything, but had been stuck speculating what they looked like when no one was near in morbid curiosity for a while.

“Correct.” Lord Slytherin inclined his head, and paused, as if to order his thoughts, or gather the nerve to go on. Mrs. Goyle waited while petting her purring cat. He had always been a rather affectionate fellow, and now remained relaxed around Lord Slytherin when the man came to these rooms for his appointments.

“You probably could make an educated guess on what form a boggart would assumed for me in the past.” Lord Slytherin said, not exactly looking at her, but at Tom in her lap, contently cuddling. “It changed a few times, but mostly was about me dying without being remembered or having achieved something. But then it simply was my own corpse.” For a moment only the cat’s purring was filling the air with sound. “When I encountered a boggart cleaning up one of the houses belonging to the Potter estate, it showed me my form from before a potion returned me to the form you see here sitting before you. But just before Easter when I worked with Bill Weasley...” he trailed off and once again silence fell.

Carisma felt that this was another main point her patient was working on in this moment. A person’s worst fear certainly was something that could be considered important in getting a better grasp on problems that exist.
“I didn’t take the time to wait and take a good look, although I did notice that it was an angry-looking copy of Harry, but there were too many dangerous things around to take time to contemplate that change.” And he fell silent again. Maybe she should prompt him a little to help him keep going.

“And during the exam there was no danger and you actually got to take a closer look?” As she had learned that straightforward professional worked best with Lord Slytherin – while some patients needed open sympathy, he certainly wasn’t one of them – she used such a tone and chose her words accordingly.

“Yes.” He really looked stressed now, and was breathing in a pattern Carisma recognized as one he seemed to use when occluding. “And I’m not sure if I just interpreted the expression wrong those times in France, or if it changed again. Either way, he wasn’t looking angry. He was disdainful. Berating me for falling for his ploy, mocking me for letting me form a connection to him, for caring. I know that it’s what I fear and not the truth… but at the same time I fear it could be true.”

They had a lot to unpack there, so Carisma started to help Lord Slytherin to accept that he had made himself vulnerable, and to recognize just how much happier he was for the fact that he had let Harry and Marcus in.

There still was work to do, but he really had come far since he had started.

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*Sunday, 9th of June 1996*

In the flurry of activity in preparation for the Potions exam the next day, Harry had felt a need for some solitude and quiet. But he hadn’t wanted to retreat to his room down in the Slytherin dungeon, the weather was too nice for that.

So he was now walking around in one of the courtyards open to the sky, in the search of a place to sit and read without being interrupted. But it didn’t look like luck would be on his side today. The younger years pretty much had finished their exams and were enjoying the nice weather as much as Harry wished to do, but a lot less quietly.

Dodging another group of excited gobstone players – and their audience – Harry contemplated if it wouldn’t be better to just fold and retreat to the dungeons when a gruff voice spoke up from behind him. “And not one thought to who will clean up all that mess when they scurry off from here for a meal, or to make an even bigger mess somewhere else.”

Not so long ago Harry would have jumped in guilt at hearing that voice, but now he felt an impulse to smile and turned with a friendly word on his lips. “Mr. Filch, it’s nice to see you.”

Mrs. Norris was – like most of the time – meandering around her owner’s legs, purring, and still was one of the ugliest cats Harry had ever seen. “Mr. Slytherin, you seem to be searching for something,” the caretaker answered, not reacting in any visible way to Harry’s expression of being glad to see him.

“I’m searching for a quiet place to read that isn’t outside where it’s windy, but also not inside the
dungeons where I would miss out on the sunshine,” Harry answered easily enough. The wind was chilling outside the castle walls, and probably the reason why so many students had flocked to the courtyards when they didn’t feel the need to study.

“I’ve a commission to work on. If you're looking for a place with sunlight and without hooligans making a racket, you could come and sit in my workroom for a while.” Filch didn’t sound any friendlier than he ever had, but Harry saw the offer for what it was.

“That would be wonderful, sir,” Harry agreed happily and followed the other to the out-of-the-way workroom with its wonderful light.

Harry had settled on a chair belonging to a worktable near a window, and out of the way, getting out Magic of Intent to read a little, when a stack of big books was set down in front of him with gentle hands. “These are museum catalogues from various exhibitions from around the world. Magical and otherwise. You've had a pretty one-sided exposure to magical art so far. Hogwarts has a lot of portraits, but most of them are pretty old. But that’s hardly all that there is.” And without another word, Mr. Filch returned to the other corner of the room, setting up tools and materials to work on whatever his commission was.

As he had access to his own books pretty much all the time, Harry decided to have a look at the museum catalogues Mr. Filch had offered him to have a look at. Who knew when the dour man would offer this again?

A few pages into the first big book – filled with colourful and glossy prints of all pieces of an exhibition from over ten years ago – Harry was enthralled. These pieces seemed to be magical abstract art from South American artists. And they were nothing like what Harry had seen so far. Not when his class from muggle school had visited the National Gallery in London, nor anywhere in Hogwarts or the few manors he had visited since his adoption.

Later, when his body let Harry know that he should take a break and eat something, he was surprised to notice that Mrs. Norris had made herself at home right on his bag and was sleeping.

With a shrug Harry turned back to the catalogue of an exhibition of sculptures, he could eat later. But this was interesting now.

From the other end of the room Argus Filch looked over with a considering expression before turning back to his work, searching for a good match in his collection of linens to repair a missing piece of canvas.

oooOOooo

The job of Headmistress was one fraught with stress and frustration. More often than in the past, Minerva needed a way to relax in the evenings that went farther than reading a good book by the fire with a small measure of whiskey. So she found herself once more wandering the halls of Hogwarts in her cat form.

Meeting with all the familiars of students, running after mice, chasing her own tail, lounging in a spot of moonlight... life as a cat was relaxing in a way life as a witch was not.

The fact that she could let her worries rest for a while and concentrate on the relatively simple task of following a scent trail, or investigate a rustling noise, made her animagus form one of her most
effective ways to get rid of some of the stress.

There! What had that sound been? Ears perked up, and swivelled on her head, trying to locate the vicinity from where the sound of steps was reaching her.

In this part of the dungeon there shouldn’t be any humans around at this time of night. On silent paws Minerva prowled along the wall in the direction of the soft sound of shuffling feet. Ready to pounce – more figuratively than literally – Minerva rounded a corner and stopped in her tracks, meowing softly.

“Hello there, kitty.” Sonja, Severus’ wife was there, wrapped in a warm robe, smiling down to where Minerva was sitting in the usual cat fashion. “Prowling the halls? Can’t sleep?”

For a moment Minerva hesitated, as she didn’t know if Sonja knew that Minerva was an animagus. It was common knowledge in the castle, as transforming was one of Minerva’s favourite demonstrations in Transfiguration lessons. Had Severus told his wife?

So Minerva decided to nod in a decidedly human fashion, taking a few steps backwards – after getting back to all fours – before transforming back into her human form, leaving behind the excellent eyesight for these dark corridors, and smiling at Sonja.

“Something like that, yes,” Minerva answered the question, delighted over the slightly startled expression of the other woman. “It’s always nice to take a walk around the castle when it’s as quiet as it is now. What about you?”

“Can’t sleep. And if I stay in our quarters with a light on, Severus will be there within minutes. It’s funny how he can sleep with me not near, but will notice something is amiss when I’m sitting in the living room reading.” Sonja smiled, turned and fell into step with Minerva.

“I guess someone in the living room in the past was always a student in need of help, but you’re not married all that long that he would already be accustomed to never sleeping alone,” Minerva posed a theory that could very well be true, even as she suspected that the man’s life as a spy among the Death Eaters had a big part in that as well.

“Possible,” Sonja agreed. “In fact I’m kind of surprised how often one of the prefects comes to our door in search of Severus because something needs his attention.”

“He certainly has some experience as a surrogate parent. I hope for you both that he’ll manage as well with a baby as he does with his little snakes.” Minerva was quite glad that Severus would be staying on as professor, even now that Albus wasn’t here any longer and there was no need to keep a spy at the school from either side of the past conflict. She eyed the woman walking at her side. The pregnancy looked to be farther along than she had expected. Severus and Sonja had married in November. Now it was June, but Sonja looked to be almost at the end. “How is everything going?”

Sonja hummed, one hand rubbing over her stomach. “Reasonably well. The usual problems,” she waved her hand around, not going into detail, “but my midwife and healer are quite happy with how everything is progressing. Only the last trimester to go.”

So Sonja probably didn’t want to talk too much about her pregnancy, which Minerva would respect, of course. Therefore she changed the topic slightly. “Have you made plans for the summer holidays?”

“We’ll be moving to the manor after Severus has ordered everything in preparation for the next school year. The elves have finished renovating, and we’ll be planting some of the potion
gardens.” She rubbed her stomach again. “Well, Severus will be planting, and I’ll be giving
directions, most likely.”

Laughing at that mental image, the two of them wandered the halls a while longer, together this
time.

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Monday, 10th of June 1996

The weekend hadn’t been all that relaxing with all the revisions they had done and the rising
tension. The stories that Ron had told them when Hermione wasn’t near enough to hear made
Harry a little more happy that he now was in Slytherin and far away from an irate Hermione
sniping at first-years.

They just had been asked to place their quills down as the written part of the Potions exam was
finished, and Harry was standing from his place, stretching his fingers and arms to combat the
fatigue caused by writing so much in such a short time.

He felt that the exam had worked out rather well. Especially since Snape had helped him get
caught up over the summer and had dropped his antagonistic behaviour right from the start of the
year.

Making his way over to the door, choosing his path hoping to catch up with Marvolo before they
reached the entrance hall, Harry rolled his shoulders. He may have been a little tense there. But his
result in this exam would decide if he got to take Potions to NEWT level, and everything he had
learned so far about the art of painting magical paintings indicated that potions did play a role in
the creation of paints that would allow for the painting’s subjects to retain memories and interact
with those standing in front of the painting.

It simply was important that he did do well.

When Harry spotted Hermione falling into step right next to Marvolo, already starting to speak, it
was almost too late. But he managed to dodge behind Gregory – who did look kind of disheartened
– and avoid being pulled into the conversation. He really would like to talk with his father, but not
to rehash the whole exam as Hermione was wont to do.

“What’s your take on this exam, Lord Slytherin? Did it differ much from the one you took the first
time?” She sounded eager to get some first-hand information on how OWL exams had changed
over the last decades.

“Well, most of the principles haven’t developed much, especially at the level OWLs are. There are
some advanced techniques that you haven’t learned yet that are pretty new. I think they probably
will make an appearance in the NEWT exam, at least a few of them anyway. Only the extra credit
section was kind of surprising. You really did have Polyjuice in class?” Harry heard the surprise in
his father’s voice and thought back to the long answer he had written on that extra credit question.
It had been rather easy to write about the potion’s effect and limitations, as well as on why it was
banned and how to identify it.
“Oh,” Harry could see Hermione waving that question away, “we didn’t learn how to brew it. But it was named as an example for a potion using lacefly-wings as a stabilizing agent, in our second year. Someone doing a little extra reading on those potions named as examples, but either illegal or too dangerous for students to brew, would have been able to answer that question.”

For a moment Harry wondered if Hermione was thinking on how she had spend quite some time as a cat-human hybrid after mistakenly putting a cat hair into her portion of the Polyjuce, but then he stepped out of the Hall – a few students between him and Marvolo talking with Hermione, obviously quite happy to do so – and gravitated over to where Ron and Neville were standing with a few of the other Gryffindors. His own housemates would be able to find him easily enough.

“Do you feel prepared for the practical, Neville?” Harry had been surprised when he had heard that the Potions practical would be in the Great Hall just like most of the others. He wasn’t really sure how the change in scenery might affect his brewing. All that light – it was a sunny day – would make a big difference. Hopefully for the better.

“As prepared as I can be, I guess.” Nevill said, rubbing his wand hand up and down the side hem of his robe. “It’ll help that Professor Snape won’t be stalking through the rows. He’s always distracting me.”

“Can you believe he isn’t allowed in because the examiners think he might try to help us?” Ron asked still boggled by the very idea of someone accusing Snape of helping anyone but Slytherins cheat.

“I think it’s more of a general rule than one created with Professor Snape specifically in mind,” Harry said once again, watching how Draco seemed to be reassuring Gregory, while there was a widening circle around where Hermione was talking animatedly – the breadth of her gestures was a somewhat good measurement of her excitement for a topic – with Marvolo a little farther into the entrance hall.

“Maybe,” Ron sounded dubious, but let the question drop.

“There you are,” Theo said from behind Harry who turned just far enough to see his friend move through the sparse crowd waiting for the Great Hall to be changed back to its normal configuration again.

“Where else should I be?” Harry asked, grinning.

“I don’t know?” Theo did a fake thinking face that made Harry chuckle. “Talking with your father, or taking a restroom break, maybe.”

Harry shrugged. Those two were likely options. “Fair enough. But as you see, I’m standing here, talking with my friends.” Theo rolled his eyes at Harry, who grinned despite his general nervousness. “It looks as if Hermione finally has found someone sharing in her desire to speak at length about an exam taken just moments ago.” Harry waved in the direction of the open space around the pair of them, and laughed again when Theo groaned.

“She’s bloody mental!” Ron said, shaking his head. “But better him than us, I think.”

Harry looked towards Ron and wondered why exactly the other had been so interested in Hermione. He was constantly complaining over her interests and habits. It was kind of baffling.

Luna’s arrival – together with a large number of other students who were hungry and wanted to eat – distracted Harry, as she grabbed his hands and tugged him until he bent that little distance down
to her with a smile for a kiss.

Until the doors to the Great Hall were opened again, Harry didn’t pay that much attention to his surroundings. And once the doors had been opened, Harry walked over with Luna to the Ravenclaw table, not seeing the eye-rolls from his male friends, or the fond look his father was giving him. Harry was much too engrossed in a discussion over the question of whether there might be dryads in the Forbidden Forest.

Much too quickly lunch was over, and Harry stood at his workstation for the Potions practical.

There was a roll of parchment, and a lot of ingredients in bowls, phials, and tins, not one of them labelled. There also was a scale with a set of weights, a mortar and pestle, a cutting board, a set of knives, several stirrers, and a lot of other tools usually to be found in a potions laboratory. In short, there was everything Harry would need to brew any potion. There certainly was more than any one potion would justify.

They were allowed to have blank parchment and something to write with, their wand, and their own dragonhide gloves at hand, but nothing else from their own equipment.

Taking a deep breath, Harry picked up the roll and broke the wax keeping it closed, unfurling the roll to take a look at the potion he was supposed to brew. As far as Hermione could find out during her research into how OWL exams worked – and what the older students had said – no two students at stations next to each other got the same potion, and they were supposed to know the correct ingredients by sight, which probably was the explanation for all the extras Harry had at his station.

Fighting back another wave of insecurity – this somehow felt so much more important than all the other exams they had taken so far – Harry reminded himself that he had a plan.

He got out a piece of parchment and read over his assigned potion. First he would write out the instructions the way he now always did. Each step neatly ordered one after the other, not instructions strung along so long as there was room on the line, as it was usually done. With that format he all too easily missed adding something that was last in the line, if there was a part that took longer than a few seconds.

The moment Harry had changed the layout of his instructions, he turned to sort through the ingredients to find what he needed and move everything he didn’t need out of the way. From the other stations smoke in different colours was already rising, but Harry ignored the feeling of being behind. He wasn’t behind. Careful preparation was an important step, and rushing into this might well end with an error which he couldn’t correct.

After that Harry put on his gloves, lit the fire under his cauldron, and started to prepare the ingredients for the base. He still had plenty of time and knew what he had to do for the potion to come out right.

Once the base was finished and the colour matched what he knew it should be at this stage, Harry felt himself relax a little. He looked around while the potion needed to simmer for a few moments – he had set a timer spell that would alert him a minute before he would need to add the next ingredient – and noticed the expression of concentration, but not terror, on the face of Neville, who was brewing nearby. The absence of Professor Snape made a visible difference for the Herbology prodigy.

When his wand vibrated, notifying Harry that it was time to add the shredded beetle wings, he turned back to his work and was busy until he could bottle a sample of his potion and leave it at his
It had been kind of fun to brew a Draught of Peace surrounded by so many nervous teenagers. Marvolo was sure he was one of the few, if not the only one, having fun during this afternoon brewing. There weren’t many occasions when one was able to brew seemingly under the open sky.

Finishing up slightly early, Marvolo sat back on the stool provided and enjoyed the sounds of business around him. At a few stations the vapours rising hadn’t looked all that promising. But that was to be expected on the OWL exam. Not everyone managed to become a competent enough brewer in five years, and exam anxiety did the rest.

Walking out of the Great Hall at a leisurely pace, Marvolo kept an eye out for his son, and Miss Granger, who was an excellent conversationalist after an exam. It had been fun to discuss the questions of the written portion and the differences between now and back when Marvolo had taken the exam for the first time.

“Dad!” Harry called from somewhere further back and Marvolo turned, smiling as he spotted his son who looked a lot less nervous now that the exam was done.

“Harry. You look as if you are reasonably happy with how you have done on the exam.” The potion Marvolo had been assigned had been no easy one, but it also hadn’t been complex enough that he hadn’t noticed what was going on at Harry’s station. So he knew at least that it hadn’t gone horribly wrong.

“I think so,” Harry answered grinning, “Will you return home right away?” The boy used one finger to push his glasses back up his nose. More of the students were walking by and Marvolo could see a few of Harry’s friends gather in a group a few paces away.

“Yes. I promised Marcus that we would build a new castle and play with the dragons this evening.” Mrs. Peters had told Marvolo that Marcus had missed him in the afternoons after school on the days that he had taken exams at Hogwarts, and that Marcus had played exams with Nagini. Or so she assumed anyway, as she had no idea what Marcus had told the snake.

“Sounds like fun.” Just a fraction of a second later Harry had enveloped Marvolo in a hug and the motion to return it came much more naturally than it had the very first time.

While enjoying the hug – it felt longer than it probably was, but hugs were great – Severus walked past and made eye contact with Marvolo. There hadn’t been much reason for them to communicate mind to mind – sometimes they did during Wizengamot sessions that were exceedingly tedious – but just as every time their eyes met, Marvolo felt and saw the impression of Severus giving a deep, sweeping bow sent by the other man. Almost automatically Marvolo send back a greeting as well as acceptance of the service and respect offered.

Harry and Marvolo released their hug, Severus vanished – probably into the Great Hall – and
Harry’s friends tried to gain Harry’s attention.

“It looks like your friends want a bit of your time,” Marvolo said, stepping back and ignoring some frantic whispers all around. The way Harry and he were hugging each other in public wasn’t really the done thing for families of the high society of Britain in general, which was something muggles and magicals shared. But honestly, Marvolo didn’t care what others thought about the affection shown between the members of his family. All three of them could use it.

“We wanted to use a little of the warm weather to study outside,” Harry explained the group of waiting students.

“Then have some fun, don’t study to the exclusion of all else, whatever Miss Granger might say, and we’ll speak later this evening,” Marvolo said, making a shooing motion at Harry, who rolled his eyes at him but went with a short wave.

“Have fun building castles!” Harry was laughing when he made his way over to his friends, and the group trooped out onto the grounds. Marvolo would have to at least try to say farewell to the examiners, anything else would be rude.

When he walked out of the door of the castle down towards the village, Marvolo spotted Harry and his friends on a blanket, reading in a sunny spot.

With a smile Marvolo apparated back home, where he would impersonate a dragon, attacking a castle build out of toy blocks, for the rest of the afternoon.


Thursday, 13th of June 1996

“Why did it have to be History as the last exam?” Ron groaned, falling back onto the blanket they had placed on the ground near the edge of the lake and a few trees.

“At least we’re now finished with our OWL exams,” Hermione tried to calm her friend down. “And the results will come by owl during the holidays. So stop whining and sit up, I want to take a picture of all of us!” She had run up to the tower to get her camera for a picture of all their friends now that they had finished their fifth year here at Hogwarts. It was a much larger group than Hermione had expected it ever to be. The most surprising addition was Draco, even as the other Slytherins were people Hermione wouldn’t have expected to call friends at the end of last year. “Theo, Ginny, come, I want to take a picture. Luna, Harry, you too!” It was like herding cats!

Finally she had managed to get everyone settled on the blankets, and arranged in a manner that would look passable in a picture frame. Beside Harry and Ron – her very first friends – there was Luna right next to Harry, Ginny and Theo, Draco with Vincent and Gregory – more because they always were near Draco than that Hermione would call them friends – Neville, Fred and George grinning from ear to ear because they had rented a shop, Daphne and Astoria Greengrass, Millicent and Pansy. Setting up the camera her great-uncle had given her for her birthday so it would take a picture on its own the moment Hermione was in place herself and gave the command, she mused over the changes the year had brought.
She now was heiress to a seat on the Wizengamot and a big family fortune, and on her way into politics and with that a way to work on positive change guaranteed. Harry now had a family, Sirius Black was a free man, and a father! That she now was friends with Slytherins was kind of tame in comparison!

Hermione headed over to the others, sat down right next to Fred on the one side and Daphne on the other, told everyone “Smile!” and then flicked her wand at her camera to take a series of pictures.

Then she went to get the camera, and walked back to sit in the group that had dispersed a little. “What are your plans this summer?” Astoria wanted to know, leaning back on her hands, her legs stretched out before her.

“Some art classes, more heir lessons, and father hinted at excursions we’ll take with Marcus,” Harry started the round of plans exchanges. “I also hope to have you all over at least once. Or come visit you.”

“That'd be great!” Ron exclaimed. “Maybe we can come over to Potter Manor? Bill said that the gardens would be great for a round of quidditch. Not having to avoid all the apple trees would certainly improve the game.”

“I don’t know, Ronnikins,” one of the twins said with a mean little grin. “With Mum’s ban on bludgers, the trees up the ante, so to speak.”

Ron huffed. “Playing in an open field with enough people for two whole teams would be great anyway.”

“Let’s see what we can manage. I’m sure father won’t say no when I ask.” Harry broke the tension in a way he had adopted rather frequently of late. Hermione was glad that her friend seemed to be growing up to be a responsible person.

“We’ll be in France for a while,” the older of the Greengrass sisters said, her legs folded in a more demure manner than her sister. “But I’m certainly interested in coming to watch a good quidditch match.”

“I’ll come and play. Maybe we can manage a game with girls against boys,” Astoria said, giving Ginny, who was cuddled into Theo, a rather obvious wink.

“That certainly would be fun. What to you think, Millicent, Pansy? Do you want to play too?” Ginny passed the dare on, making Hermione hope that no one would ask her to fly.

“Only if we play with beaters,” Millicent said, an unholy glint in her eyes. “That’s my favourite position.”

Harry laughed, lacing his fingers with Luna's, who was seemingly following something with her eyes that was flying around in the trees. “If we have a healer at hand, father might agree to let us play with one bludger. But you’re still a few players short.”

Hermione tried to think up a topic to distract everyone from quidditch. For a team of seven players, Luna, she, and Daphne would have to play as well, if they didn’t find other girls to take part as well.

“I’m sure we’ll find enough witches,” Luna said without looking at any of them. “Don’t you think Angelina and Katie would be interested?”

Oh, that was a good idea. Getting those two involved would make for a more interesting match and
would spare Hermione the indignity of flying on a broom. Feeling relieved, she got out writing material, and started to speak, deep in planning mode. Coordinating all their plans to find dates where they could meet up would take serious effort. “Let me draw up a list of when each of us isn’t here. I’m going to be in Bulgaria for a while, and maybe uncle Xerxes will take me to South America to visit with his older sons.” She would not mention those sons who’d elected to torture upstanding members of society into insanity. “So if we want to meet up all together, we’ll need to plan.”

That made everyone laugh, but not in a way that made Hermione feel bad. These were her friends, well aware of her quirks and happy with them. Just as she knew theirs and didn’t fault them for them… much. She really had trouble accepting some less-than-stellar study habits.

She really was looking forward to this summer holiday.

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“How do you think you did in your History OWL, Harry?” Sirius asked with a shit-eating grin. “Remus really wants to know.”

“That’s not what I said!” his friend called over from where he was preparing a fire in the fireplace. It was a rather cold evening.

“But you want to know anyway!” Sirius called back, still looking into the mirror that showed Harry on the other side, sitting on his bed in the Slytherin dorms, a grin on his face.

“I think I did reasonably well,” Harry said, moving back to get a better position against the mountain of pillows. “I’m certain no amount of revision with Hermione would have been enough to do as well. Thanks, Professor Lupin!”

Sirius flinched at the sudden loud yell, scowling at his godson who was grinning unrepentantly. “Please don’t torment my poor ears!”

“I’ll try,” was the much-too-cheeky reply. But that answer did make Sirius feel light as a feather. It was a relief seeing the boy so happy and relaxed.

“I hardly can expect more, can I?” Sirius grinned back at his godson. “Do you have plans for the summer holidays already?”

“A few,” Harry nodded. “My friends and I want to meet, play Quidditch, and so on. We also plan to make a few excursions to different places with Marcus. And then there are two art classes I want to attend.”

While Harry went off a tangent to describe all that would be part of those courses, and what other alternatives he could have had and why he hadn’t chosen one of those, Sirius pondered what Lily and James might have said to their son being this interested in art. Lily would have loved it, Sirius was sure of that. He wasn’t so certain about James. His friend hadn’t been interested in art, not really. But Sirius liked to think that James would have supported his son in whatever path he chose to take. There were less interesting and prestigious careers than that of an artist.

It wasn’t one Sirius would take – not enough action for his tastes – but it seemed to be something that Harry really enjoyed.
“Do you have plans for the summer?” Harry wanted to know, and Sirius nodded in answer before he started to speak.

“I do. I’ll take a portkey to visit Enora and Nawel for most of the summer.” Sirius was looking forward to that, and at the same time he felt kind of guilty. “I hope you don’t feel put out for me not being here.” He really would love to spend more time with Harry, but he had promised to visit the girls as well.

“Why would I?” Harry seemed honestly confused. “They’re your daughters, and you all had no opportunity to really spent time together. Of course you should visit them at home. Get to know them, teach them all that family stuff, tell them about all the pranks you’ve pulled. You’ll be back before the next school year starts, right?”

“Of course! Maybe we can arrange some kind of visit for you in the Caribbean for next summer. There probably are many interesting things to see and experience. Would you like that?” How Sirius hated sounding so vulnerable! He should be sure of himself. There was no reason why Harry wouldn’t want to visit.

“That would be awesome! Do you think Marvolo and Marcus could come too?” Harry looked so hopeful that Sirius managed with difficulty to keep his expression under control. He really didn’t like Lord Slytherin, but the man seemed to make a genuine effort, and he made Harry happy. And that was worth a lot.

“We have almost a year to plan everything. I think that should be possible.”

oooOOooo

Saturday, 29th of June 1996

Harry couldn’t remember one year in all his time at Hogwarts that he had felt quite as carefree before the summer holidays as he did this year. One of the biggest contributions to his good mood probably was the fact that he would return home to his adoptive father and brother – a family – and not the Dursleys.

And so he enjoyed pickup-quidditch games, long walks along the lake's edge with Luna, evenings on the astronomy tower – also with Luna at his side, and only occasionally spent looking at the stars – and a few more sessions with Mr. Filch and his exhibition catalogues. There also were a few more sessions of the Duelling Club, and one memorable improvised fight of three teams pitched against each other.

Of course a few NEWT students were taking exams in the subjects chosen less often, and a few of the younger students still had lessons and exams, but there were wonderful weather and no more homework. There certainly were worse ways to spend one's days.

Harry was pretty sure he had done well in his exams, and was more than happy to have changed subjects from Divination to Runes. What Ron had told them about his exam and his attempt to read the future from a crystal ball had been terrible.

And so it was with a light heart and a smile on his face that Harry walked together with his friends
into the Great Hall decked out for the End of Year Feast. The whole room was decorated in the blue and bronze banners of Ravenclaw, who had managed to gather the most points this year and had won the House Cup with a small lead on Slytherin, which was closely followed by Gryffindor.

Not the worst outcome in Harry’s eyes. Tomorrow the train would go back to London, and the holidays would start. But first there was the feast to enjoy.

Chapter End Notes

I have to say that it’s not easy to get a good grip on the timeline of this school year. Or any of the others. The end is kind of mushy in the book and it feels as if Harry is at the school for quite some time before the train back to London. Maybe NEWT exams are held in the last two weeks of June? But wouldn’t that be almost a month for the younger years without real classes? It’s all quite confusing. So I wavered back and forth, wishing I had made more concrete plans much earlier and finally settled on what you just read.
With Harry always getting into trouble in the last weeks of the school year that time isn’t all that clearly defined in the books, I’m afraid :D

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your continued support and kind words! I read all comments you leave for me, even if I’m not able to answer or react to them all. You all enable me to keep on writing!

Also:
There now is a translation into Russian in the works. Lotraxi is working on it and did ask before starting, so if you know Russian go over there and then tell me how it works out!

ficbook.net/readfic/8422805

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, 29th of June 1996

Harry and his friends had been a little bit early, and while all the Professors were already there, the students weren’t. While they were waiting, Harry enjoyed the chatter around him – Blaise and Theo were arguing over the best wax for care of a broom – and looked up at the ceiling enjoying the play of colours as the sun was nearing the horizon. That would be an interesting palette to play with.

Suddenly the constant din of voices died down, drawing Harry’s attention to the front and the head table where Professor McGonagall stood behind the lectern looking as stern as ever.

“Good evening.” Her voice easily carried through the Great Hall, either by magic or her natural ability to project her voice, and everyone was silently watching her, even the Weasley twins. “This year has brought many changes to Hogwarts.” Harry heard a snort somewhere from his right and silently agreed. That had been a massive understatement. “New students have found their footing, and our graduating class will be leaving the school this summer to go out into the world and explore it and their future. All others will return after the summer to start another year of learning.”

She certainly had a different style than Dumbledore had had. Not that Harry remembered all that many end-of-year speeches. “Before we all eat, I want to inform you of a few more changes coming in the next school year. Professor Slinkhard will not be returning next year, as he plans to invest his time in writing a new edition of his book.” A massive wave of applause and murmurs forced the Headmistress to pause, and Harry, while relieved that the theory probably wouldn’t be that big a part of lessons next year, thought it was a little bit rude to make their feelings quite that obvious.

“We all wish you the very best, Wilbert,” she continued once the clapping and murmurs had subsided. Professor Slinkhard gave a short nod, but didn’t stand to give a speech of his own – thankfully – and Professor McGonagall moved on. “We hopefully will also have a new Transfiguration Professor and Head of Gryffindor. But one change needs your action before the new year starts.”

Harry, whose attention had started to wander, perked up. Was that what he thought it might be?
“Mr. Argus Filch, who is our very own art conservator, has agreed to offer an Art class spanning all years beginning next year. If you’re interested in attending such a class, you should send an essay and some examples of your own work to Hogwarts before the end of July. Professor Filch will screen the applications, and information of acceptance and needed class materials will be sent out with your usual letters.”

Harry didn’t pay much mind to Professor McGonagall’s closing words. He was too giddy at the opportunity to get to attend an actual arts class at Hogwarts next year. He only realised that the Headmistress had finished when the platter before him filled with a big mountain of roasted chicken legs and wings and everyone around him started filling their plates.

“Do you want some peas?” Gregory asked, holding up a bowl filled with peas.

“No, thanks,” Harry said, shaking his head. “Theo, can you give me some of the mincemeat pies?”

“Sure,” Theo answered, taking Harry’s plate so he could move it closer to the dish where there were the small pies were.

“So, are you going to apply?” Daphne asked, daintily spearing some potato pieces onto her fork.

“Apply for the art class?” Harry asked, accepting his plate back from Theo and reaching for a boat filled with gravy to drown his pie in its contents. Daphne nodded, chewing, so Harry didn’t wait for more of an answer and explained his thoughts on this topic. “I plan to apply. Not sure what to write about. Maybe, I should ask him before we leave tomorrow. If he can elaborate on what the essay should be about, that would be helpful. Selecting what to send as an example of my art is a little bit easier. We spoke about how to assemble a portfolio if I want to go to university after I’m finished here, and also what a Master might require if I wanted to be an apprentice.” In fact Harry felt pretty confident that he would manage to compose a good application. “I’m more interested in who else might apply.”

For a moment there was silence around Harry, who used that to finally start eating. He knew that none of his year-mates in Slytherin were interested in art. Or at least not in creating art on a level that would make them wish to take classes on it.

“Do you think there will be enough people taking it to even have the class?” Draco asked suddenly, sounding thoughtful. “I know that some years it’s not all that certain that a new arithmancy class will start.”

Harry shrugged, chewed, swallowed, and then answered. “I’m pretty sure that it’ll take place even if I’m the only student. Mr. Filch hinted that Professor McGonagall wants to bring back more variety to the school, and hopes to get interested professors by showing that she can come through with all that’s needed.” Until now Harry had known that Mr. Filch had been offered the opportunity to teach, but not whether or not the man had decided to accept.

“But Filch as a professor?” Blaise asked, wrinkling his nose as if he was smelling something bad. “He’s a Squib, and an unpleasant person on top! I’m not sure anyone will dare to apply.”

“When have you ever interacted with him?” Harry wanted to know. Ever since Mr. Filch had shown Harry the workroom, Harry’s view of the man had changed, but he knew that the general student population had a less-than-favourable opinion of Mr. Filch.

“Interacted? Not much. The last time I was near him, I tried to avoid him because I was out after curfew,” Blaise shrugged, basking in the chuckles his allusion to breaking the rules got him.
Even Harry had to chuckle. Even under his invisibility cloak and with the map, it was a nerve-wracking experience evading Mrs. Norris and Mr. Filch. But it had been enjoyable to evade the patrols in the halls with Luna there under the cloak, as he escorted her back to Ravenclaw Tower. “Well, if you really are interested in art, it probably is worth the risk. And let me tell you, Mr. Filch knows his art,” Harry said with conviction because it was simply the truth.

“If you say so.” Blaise didn’t seem convinced, but he didn’t need to be. That others were listening in – as they almost always did – and would inform others of what Harry had said, was much more important.

“Remember our third year? When the Gryffindor guardian portrait was damaged? Mr. Filch was the one to repair it. He also does commission work on magical paintings. I’ll apply for sure!” That should be enough to make it through at least part of the student population during the train ride tomorrow. It would be kind of lonely to be the only art student in that class. And it would be sad if another interested in art might not apply because Mr. Filch had such a sunny disposition.

“Do you know if your mother will be there tomorrow to pick you up?” Daphne asked Draco, moving the topic in an entirely different direction.

Content to eat and listen, Harry wondered if Marcus was looking forward to seeing him again, or if his little brother would be unhappy with having to share the attention.

When dessert replaced the more savoury foods, Harry happily filled his plate with a good helping of the multilayer-ice-cream-sculpture that appeared right in front of him. It was much easier to enjoy the good food knowing that he would not be made to eat less than his cousin, who was forced to follow a strict diet in an attempt to make him lose weight.

Later, a sleepy and stuffed Harry followed his friends down to the common room and their beds.

ooooOoooo

Sunday, 30th of June 1996

A herd of hippogryphs was running across the field of lush grass reaching from horizon to horizon, and he smiled, effortlessly rising into the sky. There was a big, almost endless forest not far away, and it sounded as if there was an even bigger herd on its way.

With a start Marvolo woke up. There was a heavy weight on his bed, mostly resting over his stomach.

It took only the fraction of a second until Marvolo was awake enough to register the chattering in his ears and to realise that Marcus had run into his room, and was talking a mile a minute. The only light was the light from the hall falling into the room through the small crack the open door provided.

“Harry’ll be back today! Then we’ll be playing every day! And flying! I’m sure if I ask he’ll take me up on his broom. And can we go now to pick him up?” Marcus was obviously wide awake and Marvolo was really glad that the wards around the house were good enough that he didn’t feel he had to keep his wand directly under his pillow when he slept. He didn’t dare contemplate what
could have happened being woken in this manner with his wand readily available. Maybe he should set some wards to wake him should someone enter his bedroom.

“Marcus,” Marvolo tried to interrupt the torrent of words. “Marcus, it’s not even light out yet.” Down near his feet a grumbly hiss was heard.:Bubbly hatchling is up way too early. Make the Bubbly hatchling sleep again:. Nagini wasn’t happy to be awake either.

Marvolo felt Marcus deflating, and biting back a sigh he sat up, taking his son with him. “Harry will be back later today. He and everyone else are probably still asleep. In a few hours the train will start on its journey and arrive even later at the train station here in London. Harry will be here for dinner.” Marcus slumped against Marvolo’s shoulder and Marvolo placed a kiss on the little one’s head. “I’m excited too, Marcus. But if we get up now, it’ll be long hours of waiting till Harry is here. Let’s sleep a little longer.”

Marcus nodded, and started to tug at the blanket. Resigning himself to little bony knees, elbows, and feet poking him, Marvolo moved the blankets so that Marcus could slip under them, and placed his arms around his son so they would both be comfortable.

“I’m so happy that Harry comes back today!” Marcus mumbled into Marvolo’s shoulder, wiggling to find a comfortable spot, the same as Nagini was doing further down on the bed. “I feel like I might explode with happiness.”

That simple statement filled Marvolo with a complex mess of emotions, too many to find any words to say in answer. So he simply hugged his small son a little tighter for a moment, placed another kiss on his head, and murmured some platitudes. “Maybe you’ll dream something interesting to tell Harry about later.”

It didn’t take long for Marcus to fall asleep, but with all those emotions doing cartwheels inside of Marvolo’s mind, he had to employ occlumency to calm down enough to sleep. But eventually sleep found him again, wrapped in the embrace of his son and familiar. It was a peaceful place to be.

oooOOooo

Sunday, 30th of June 1996

Just as it happened every year, there was a hectic search for lost property going on in the Slytherin dungeons. The pandemonium he had experienced himself as a student had decided his policy of the packed trunk before going to the Leaving Feast.

Not that it was truly working.

With a sigh and a flick of his wand, Severus collected the scattered possessions of various students from all corners of the common room in the middle of a carpet in front of the main fireplace. It was early and the students were just getting up, so there was no chance of someone being injured by flying books, trinkets, empty potions phials, sweet-wrappers, chocolate frog cards, half empty packages branded as skiving snack boxes and many items more.

The elves were tasked with keeping the castle clean, but Severus had made sure that they wouldn’t remove items belonging to any students from the common room or the dorms. Somehow his
charges needed to learn to keep track of their belongings and keep order. It usually worked pretty well, but there always were a few things that managed to be kicked under the shelves, seats and into other hard-to-reach places.

Before the students would arrive to look through the finds and collect what was theirs – this was a well established tradition by now – Severus quickly removed potion phials – he needed to check what those were – and everything that was labelled WWW in bright patterns and colours. No need to return potentially harmful products to his students. If they were careless enough to leave them lying around, what would happen if they got them back?

When the first student moved into the common room, Severus quickly pocketed the cardboard package of something called Canany Cream and turned, trying to look unperturbed and calm.

Relatively unsurprisingly, it was Mr. Slytherin who walked into the common room, as put together as he ever got. That hair of his seemed to be an impossible case. But the robes were fresh, the tie neatly tied, and the shirt tucked in.

“Good morning, sir,” the boy greeted giving a tiny inclination of his head.

“Mr. Slytherin,” Severus returned the greeting, feeling wrongfooted by the very fact that the boy was paying him the respect he was due. It simply didn’t go well together with the face of his school-time enemy – those glasses were different in design, but they were enough of a reminder – and the eyes of his very best friend. But even with those visual reminders, there were the colours of Slytherin in the boy’s uniform, and the memory of many hours spent teaching the child Occlumency and the basics of potions.

There really wasn’t much to say, so Severus simply stood by the haul of lost items waiting for the other students to arrive, watching Mr. Slytherin inspect the various items.

It didn’t take long until the common room was filled, prompting Severus to recite his speech, as he did each year. “Take only the things that are yours to claim. And if there’s something that you no longer need, put it in the box over there,” he waved a hand in the direction of the box, “so another may claim it.”

After that Severus made his escape – a dignified retreat towards one of the more out-of-the-way niches near the door to their quarters – watching all those teenagers searching for their lost possessions.

“I thought they were required to have their trunks packed yesterday,” Sonja asked from behind Severus, her arms snaking around his midsection, her head coming to rest on his shoulder.

“They were, and they have. For the most part, at least. I’m sure a few pyjamas, stuffed toys, and the like probably aren’t packed yet. But it’s a lot more organized than it would be without my insistence on the trunks being packed early,” Severus answered, speaking low enough not to be overheard from the group bantering over chocolate frog cards and celebrating the return of trinkets thought lost.

“I’m sure you’re right, love,” Sonja said, pressed a kiss to his cheek, and walked back to their quarters. Severus would follow her as soon as the students were finished.
“Has anyone seen my makeup?”

“Trevor! Trevor! Come on, where are you?”

Hermione carefully placed Crookshanks’ favourite blanket in the carrier that had served as a bed for him – placed next to her trunk and a little out of the way – the whole school year. She rolled her eyes when another of the boys hollered downstairs if someone had seen his Falmouth Falcons Quidditch jersey. She had had her stuff packed before the Leaving Feast yesterday. And Hermione wasn’t really sure what the difficulty was. There had to be something. Why else would so many now be running around like headless chickens, searching for seemingly important objects at the last minute?

“Have you seen my transfiguration text, Hermione?” Ginny asked from the door, looking decidedly frazzled, hair escaping from her ponytail.

“No,” Hermione answered, standing up from her crouch, automatically smoothing her skirt. “Did you check on all the tables in the common room? And all the beds in your dormitory?”

“Yes! I did!” There was an impatient undertone to Ginny’s response, and she was gone before Hermione could propose the idea of trying an Accio charm in each room that the book might be in.

Shrugging, Hermione checked her bag for the books she wanted to have at hand during the train ride, before giving Crookshanks another good ear scratch – the elves would make sure that her familiar would be down at the train – before walking down through all the usual chaos just before the summer holidays to go and eat breakfast.

Dodging a flying pair of socks, she made it to the portrait hole and slipped out, her book bag slung over one shoulder.

oooOOooo

During the rush on the carriages and all the back-and-forth, Draco somehow had ended up in one carriage with Crabbe and Goyle as well as Harry.

It wouldn’t have been his first choice, and probably also not Harry’s, but it no longer was the possibly volatile combination that it would have been before this summer.

“Are you looking forward to going home and seeing your baby sister?” Harry asked, sitting relaxed on the opposite bench, looking out at the passing grounds.

Draco was of two minds about that. But he smiled and nodded. “It’s not like we can actually play together. Yet. But yes, I’m happy I’ll be home again and seeing her and our parents.” And he was, even while he was apprehensive what changes this might bring to his own life.

Harry turned away from the view as their carriage rumbled over an uneven stretch of road. “I’m looking forward to the holidays. Even with all the lessons I’ll have.” He laughed, and dragged a hand through his hair. No wonder that it always looked as if an owl had made its nest in there.

“Isn’t he a demanding father?” Draco felt like smashing his face into the window of the carriage. That wasn’t something he had wanted to ask. He did want to know, but asking was rude and gave too much away.
One brow winged up, almost vanishing in the unruly hair, and Harry gave a wry smile. “You’ve seen us interact.” He gave a small, one-shouldered shrug. “I’ve got a lot to learn, and father makes sure I do. But he isn’t unreasonable. You’ve read the stories just like everyone else. He knows what bad guardians are like. I guess that’s why he works so hard to be better.” There was another shrug and Draco heard the admonishment his own governess always had barked out – in a ladylike manner, of course – when he had done something like that back when he had been not quite nine years old.

“It’s crazy. You’re crazy! You know that. Don’t you?” Draco really wasn’t sure what he should, or could, say to that claim. He had seen how casually the Dark Lord had cast that Cruciatus, while holding Harry in his arm. And that man should be the same as the one who claimed to have grown up in a muggle orphanage during a war? That just didn’t add up.

Harry grinned and shrugged again, picking up his bag that was resting near his feet. “I’m pretty sure you’re right. It is kind of crazy, all things considered. But, well, it works for us.”

The carriage came to a halt. They had reached the train station just outside of Hogsmeade. Before Draco could gather his own bag or make Crabbe and Goyle move, Harry had opened the door, and made his escape. Sighing to himself, Draco climbed out of the carriage and started to walk over to the train. If he moved a little faster he might find a compartment to claim even if he had to patrol the train from time to time.

oooOOooo

It wasn’t easy to find a private spot on the train. The compartments were filled with a few people at least, the few open carriages were never empty either, and the toilets were not a nice place to be, so Theo and Ginny had found a space between two carriages to have a quick talk.

“I’m just worried!” Ginny said, throwing her hands up, careful not to knock Theo against the wall. There wasn’t much space here. “Mum knows by now! There’s no way she doesn’t. But she hasn’t written a thing!”

Theo could see that she was worried, but he had no idea what to say to help her calm down. He was pretty sure that there was no way to calm her down without coming over as condescending, which was not his intention. Ginny’s worries weren’t unfounded. Over the years Mrs. Weasley had sent more than one howler, mostly to the twins.

“I expected a reaction as well.” He could admit that. It wasn’t even hard to admit. The reaction from their parents had been the reason they had kept their relationship a secret at the start.

Ginny huffed in frustration, placing her hands on her hips, as well as that was possible with what little space they had here. “Did you hear from your father?”

Theo shrugged. “He didn’t really say anything about it. I think he has fun teasing me about it. He wrote that I’m welcome to invite my friends, but that I of course have to observe the rules when it comes to girls visiting.” Theo rolled his eyes. He hadn’t really written his father that he had a girlfriend. Not in as many words, at least. But he knew that his father knew by all the hints that had been in his letters to Theo. “I’m pretty sure he didn’t remind me of those just because he thinks I’m old enough to be interested in dating. And judging by the picture Aiden send me last… well, let’s just say, why should he draw me holding hands with a girl with red hair if you hadn’t been
mentioned?” Sometimes Theo wished there could be such a frank relationship between him and his father as Harry seemed to have with his adoptive father.

Ginny rolled her eyes. “I say we kiss on the platform in front of everyone and get this over with for real now. All this waiting is making me crazy!”

Startled, Theo laughed. “I see the appeal, really I do. But you’re sure that’s wise? I would guess that with Harry being most likely picked up by his father there'll be reporters around. I’m not eager to make an appearance on the front page of the Prophet.” But making a declaration of some kind seemed to be a good plan.

Ginny closed her eyes and rubbed one hand over them, the tension draining from her, slumping against the wall behind her. “What a mess.”

“I guess I should have taken Harry’s advice to just tell your parents and my father and be done with it.” He really should have. “But at the same time, I think telling them in person is better.”

“So we tell them today? On the platform?” Ginny asked, sounding sceptical.

Theo shrugged. “I guess that would be best? We want to meet during the holidays, and we don’t want to hide, so…”

Theo was cut off by Ginny leaning forward and placing her lips on his. With that decision made they didn’t talk all that much until they broke up to search out their respective friends.

oooOOooo

It was hard to control Marcus in the crowded train station. Marvolo was very glad that he could apparate them here, as he couldn’t even imagine how he would have managed in the muggle part of the building. While it was crowded here on the platform with all the families arriving, muggles hurrying to their trains would have been even more distracting than simply people waiting.

But even here waiting, Marvolo held one of Marcus’ hands firmly clasped in his, while the boy was brimming with nervous energy.

Straining to see, Marcus was constantly moving forward and around trying to get a better look through all the adults obstructing his view. Maybe he should cast a monitoring spell on Marcus and allow him to move around like some other, older, kids were doing.

“Marvolo. Who gave you a bag of kneazle kittens to keep track of?” an amused voice asked from the direction of the barrier and the one floo.

Turning his head, while also reeling in Marcus who was straining in the other direction, Marvolo spotted Amelia casually walking in his direction. “I guess I only have myself to blame for this predicament. How is everything at the Ministry?”

“Well enough,” Amelia answered, with a smile. “A few of the trainees and older Aurors are grumbling over the new training program, but I’m seeing improvement already.”

Hearing Amelia’s voice, Marcus turned suddenly and moved towards her. “Aunt Amelia!”
Marvolo smiled as she crouched down to hug the small boy-shaped projectile.

“Who are you here to pick up?” Marcus wanted to know. “We’re here to pick Harry up. He’ll be home for two whole months!”

“I’m here to pick up Susan. She’s in the same year as Harry. I take it you’re excited to see your brother again?” Amelia stood up again, and Marcus had to tilt his head back so he could still look at her face.

“Yes! He promised we’ll go flying! And he’ll read me a story! And we’ll play with Nagini!” Marcus certainly would have kept on rambling – he had a tendency to do that – but Lucius and Narcissa were walking by and greeting them with the usual politeness, which had Marcus hiding behind Marvolo’s robes.

“He’s a little shy, isn’t he?” Amelia asked, a twinkle in her eyes when Marcus once again tried to see if the train was arriving. “But maybe not.”

“Dad, I can’t see!” Marcus said tugging at Marvolo’s robes and looking up to him.

For a moment Marvolo felt torn. There was a pretty easy solution to Marcus’ problem. He could pick his son up and place him on his shoulders, but that would be seen as inappropriate for a Lord of the Wizengamot. It wasn’t really done.

Just like hugs in public, banter at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall, and other undignified displays of affection.

Breaking the expectations of society – like this would certainly do – wasn’t something that Marvolo tried to avoid. In fact as Lord Voldemort he had always worked hard to ensure he couldn’t be a target for jokes – those prank spells some Order members had tended to use in battle really had felt more threatening than some of the nastier curses – doing something like that would just solidify the difference between Marvolo and Voldemort.

“Marcus.” Marvolo got his son’s attention. “I’ll cast a featherlight spell on you and then you can watch everything from my shoulders. Would you like that?”

“Yes!” Marcus exclaimed, jumping up and down in place.

With a smile Marvolo got his wand out and flicked it in the rather simple pattern for the charm reducing his son’s weigh, so it would be rather easy to hoist him up high enough to get him settled on Marvolo’s shoulders. “Then up you go!” Turning Marcus around, so his back was facing toward Marvolo, he moved to pick him up and over his head. Once he had managed to settle Marcus comfortably, Marvolo turned back to a grinning Amelia Bones.

“I can see everyone from here!” Marcus exclaimed in glee, turning his upper body this way and that, from what Marvolo was able to feel.

“Don’t look so smug, please, Amelia. My ego might get bruises.” Marvolo admonished his friend with a fake glare, which only made her chuckle.

“I don’t think that your ego is in danger of bruising, my friend. In fact you rather look as composed and in control as I have ever seen.” Amelia’s smile was more enigmatic than Marvolo could interpret right now. Was she referring only to the time that Marvolo had been Voldemort? Or did she also intend to include the time she had known about him as Voldemort in that statement?

But in that moment Marcus called out, “I see the train!” and their conversation was cut short as
everyone moved to welcome their children back for the summer.

oooOOooo

This year Harry didn’t feel trepidation when leaving the train in the usual pandemonium of students, parents, younger siblings, and familiars. Instead he was happy, carefree, and full of anticipation for good to come.

Luna and he had shared a long kiss before parting, well aware that they would be separated the moment they stepped onto the platform and off the train. And as soon as they had cleared the door, Luna was swept to one side by an excited first-year, running past them with a happy call of “Mum!” and then there was a group of boys, and Harry could only see Luna waving and moving away from the train searching for her father.

Dragging his own trunk behind, Harry also started to look for Marvolo and Marcus, as they had promised to be there to pick him up. Once again something new. Being picked up for the summer by his family on the platform and not having them waiting outside the train station, grudgingly making the effort while trying to give any other reason for that than that Harry needed to be picked up.

Theo and Ginny walked past, holding hands, their trunks trailing after them, probably because of a spell Theo had cast. Here among all those adults and children, it was unlikely that anyone would be able to distinguish who had cast what. And if Theo had cast the spell on the train, he hadn’t even broken any rules. Looked like they were going to tell their parents about the fact that they were dating and had been for a while now. Harry hoped that it would go well for them.

“Harry!” That had been Marcus yelling. Harry looked around, searching for his little brother somewhere near him, but he couldn’t spot him among the legs and trunks all around. “Harry!” There it was again, and Harry stopped where he was, taking more time to search his surroundings. Then something moving caught his attention, so far up towards the ceiling that he thought for a moment an owl had escaped its cage until he realized that green and purple weren’t colours an owl usually had.

Marcus somehow had managed to be higher up than all the adults and was waving with great enthusiasm, probably to get Harry’s attention. Waving back to make sure that Marcus knew Harry had seen him, he picked up the handle of his trunk again, carefully weaving his way through the many people in the direction of where Marcus was easily seen above all the others. After a few strides Harry finally comprehended that Marcus was sitting on Marvolo’s shoulders.

The sudden stab of jealousy was entirely unexpected. Harry couldn’t remember having been carried like that even once. Maybe James or Lily, or Sirius, Remus, or any of their other friends had carried Harry around like that when he had been old enough to sit. But Harry certainly didn’t remember any such instance. And while he had seen Dudley being carried that way a few times – until his cousin got too heavy for Vernon to manage that – no one had ever even suggested that carrying Harry that way was even a distant possibility.

And now at almost sixteen years old, there was no way that Harry ever would get to experience it.

Right on the heels of that jealousy came a wave of guilt and shame.
It was true, Harry hadn’t had the luck that Marcus had had to be adopted by a family that actually cared early enough to get to experience a happy childhood with all that belonged to it. But that was no reason to begrudge Marcus having what Harry could no longer. While he closed the distance between his waiting family and himself, Harry fell into what was by now a fairly familiar breathing pattern, and used what he had learned from Madame Goyle to work through his feelings. It was perfectly fine for him to feel sad and angry about missing out on being carried around on an adult's shoulders so he could have a good look at their surroundings. Being jealous of those that still could experience that was a natural reaction. But it was not Marcus' fault that Harry had missed out. So being angry at Marcus wasn’t a good reaction to have. Maybe there was some magical means to shrink Harry for a time – so he and Marcus would be the same size – and therefore provide a way for Harry to experience what he had missed before. Thinking about a way to actually get to be carried around like a small child suddenly made Harry doubt he actually wanted to go through with it. Being as old as he was, and having grown quite a bit, brought many benefits Harry wasn’t willing to give up easily.

Before he could manage to sort out his tangled feelings on that, Harry reached Marvolo and Marcus. Letting go of his trunk handle – leading to a thunk as the trunk came to rest on the paved platform, eliciting an indignant squeak from Hedwig in her cage on top of the trunk – and enveloping Marvolo in a hug, Harry ended up with Marcus' foot near his nose.

“Welcome back, Harry,” Marvolo murmured near Harry’s ear, squeezing a little tighter, before letting go.

Harry blinked rapidly in an attempt to quell the tears suddenly making an appearance for reasons probably buried in the mess of feelings currently making somersaults inside his stomach. “I’m glad that the year’s over.” Harry plucked his glasses from his nose, quickly cleaning them with the edge of his loose over-robe – it was warm enough that Harry had picked one of the shorter ones made from linen to wear instead of his Hogwarts uniform robes – before settling them back on his nose.

“How’s the view up there?” he asked his little brother, tilting his head back so he could look up to Marcus, who was grinning from ear to ear.

“Great! I can see everything! Aunt Amelia is over there.” Marcus pointed to somewhere off to the right. “And there are a lot of people with red hair.” Now he was pointing in the direction that Theo and Ginny had vanished to. “One of them is moving their arms in a funny way.” Marcus giggled and waved his arms around widely, almost knocking off the tall hat of a witch walking by them at that very moment.

“How do you need to say goodbye to some of your friends?” Marvolo asked, and Harry shook his head. “No, we already did that on the train.”

“Very well. Then let’s go home, shall we?” Marvolo said, carefully lifting Marcus down, while calling out, “Flimm!” which caused the elf to appear between them, facing both Harry and Marvolo in equal measure. “Please take Harry’s luggage back home, and prepare an early dinner for us. We’ll be along shortly.”

Flimm bowed again, took hold of the trunk, and vanished as fast as he had appeared, taking the luggage and the cage with him.

Marvolo was holding out a hand for Harry to take, already having linked hands with Marcus on his other side. “I’ll apparate us home, and then Harry has to tell us everything that was remarkable about his year at Hogwarts, and all his plans for the summer, so we can come up with a joint plan for our family.”
And on that note they apparated away.

“I’m sorry.” Marcus said in a tiny voice, standing there looking miserable, while Harry picked himself up from the floor of the playroom carefully.

Marvolo was there as well, as he had been roped into playing with his sons just after dinner. The big castle they had built together lay in ruins as a result of Marcus tackling Harry to land on the magnificent structure. For the moment Marvolo ignored the younger boy, all his senses concentrated on Harry. His glasses seemed to be broken, and there was blood. Working hard on not falling into a panic – he was an experienced dueller and a Dark Lord, he would not panic – Marvolo helped Harry over to the reading chair, already getting his wand out for a quick diagnostic charm. If the broken glasses had injured the eyes behind them, they would need to go to St. Mungo's, as eyes were too delicate for the limited healing spells Marvolo knew.

“Keep your eyes closed, Harry. I need to check on them and make sure there’s no glass left that could hurt you.” Marcus fidgeted behind them, but Marvolo concentrated on the result the diagnostic charm was showing him. “Seems it’s only a surface cut, there on your brow. That’s easy to heal. \textit{Episkey}.” A silent, mild, cleaning spell removed the blood that had oozed out of the cut, as well as any possible glass splinters. “You can open your eyes again, Harry. Seems as if there was no real harm done.” With that said, Marvolo turned to look to where Marcus was standing, looking afraid of what might happen next. Smiling with an ache in his chest, Marvolo gestured for Marcus to come closer. “I know that your teacher in school already said that you need to be more careful when playing, and Mrs. Peters said the same more than once. And while nothing too bad happened this time, you need to be more careful. Do you understand?”

Marcus nodded, but didn’t look up, and Marvolo really didn’t know if the boy had understood what the problem was, or if he would be able to curb his tendency to play too rough the next time. With a sigh, Marvolo tousled Marcus’ hair, before gathering the broken pieces from Harry’s glasses on the small table that always stood next to the reading chair. It looked as if everything was there. Harry shifted next to him. “Can you repair them? I don’t really have a spare pair, and I can’t really see worth a d… all that much without them.” His older son had caught himself just in time, but despite that he had a point.

“Yes, I should be able to fix them.” Marvolo answered, pointing his pale wand at the fragmented pair of spectacles. \textit{\textit{Occulus Reparo.}} and the pieces fused together once more into glasses that Harry could use. But they probably should pick up a spare set just in case, anyway. And the expense for an unbreakable enchantment wouldn’t be unreasonable, either. “Here you go.” Marvolo placed the glasses into Harry’s waiting hands, being reminded how important those glasses were for his son.

“Thanks.” Harry smiled after he had placed the glasses back on his nose, and then looked over to where Marcus was kicking at the wooden building blocks. “I’m okay, Marcus. See? Magic made my glasses whole again, and nothing bad happened. Just try to be more careful, please?”

Marcus nodded, but still didn’t look up from the floor. Marvolo watched from his crouched position next to where Harry sat on the reading chair. For a moment there was silence, until Marvolo stood with a sigh. “How about you get yourself ready for bed. Marcus? I’m sure Harry will be happy to read you a story before you go to sleep. Am I right, Harry?”
Picking up on Marvolo’s plan easily Harry nodded happily. “Sure. Marcus can pick one and then I’ll read him and Nagini a story.”

Peeking up through his fringe, Marcus already looked less unhappy, and quickly went to his room to wash, change into pyjamas, and brush his teeth, so that Harry would read him a story.

When Marcus was gone and Marvolo was alone with Harry in the playroom, he sighed again and waved his hand to clean up after them. “We’ll get you a spare pair of glasses and an enchantment to make sure your glasses won’t break that easily again. The next time we’re in Diagon Alley. I’m glad nothing too bad happened.”

“I’ve been thinking… There’s that potion that could make my eyes good enough that I won’t need glasses, right? And muggles do something like laser surgery to correct eyes. Don’t they? And using the potion isn’t really illegal anyway, right? I mean… “

Harry seemed unsure and conflicted, but Marvolo was elated. Harry had been adamant that he didn’t want to take the potion when Healer Greengrass had brought it up the first time. And now he was asking for it? “Of course. The potion isn’t illegal to use. And I know someone able to brew it correctly.” Maybe Severus still had the potion from last summer when Marvolo had added it to the list of potions he had had the man brew. And if not, he certainly was able to brew a new batch. “If you want me to, I can set everything into motion to get it for you.” Only he still had sounded rather unsure, better to leave an option for Harry to change his mind later. “And there’s no need to rush into it. You can take this potion at any point in time. If you’re not comfortable with it, you can wait until after school. Take your time.”

They were interrupted by Marcus bounding into the room, grabbing Harry’s hand and making for the door. “Come on! I’m finished. Nagini is already waiting!” With a wave back at Marvolo, Harry went with his younger brother, grinning.

Finishing the cleanup in the playroom, Marvolo then went down to the study to compose a letter to Severus. He had a potion to ask for.

oooOo00

Finally it was quiet at the Burrow. All of the children had gone to bed, or at least to their rooms, and only Arthur and Molly were still awake and in the kitchen. The sun had gone down some time ago, and the birds had gone to bed, no longer singing outside. It had been a tumultuous evening. All had started with Ginny walking up to them, hand-in-hand with the son of Benjamin Nott, suspected Death Eater.

Of course both he and Molly had heard rumours, passed along from different children to their parents via letter, and from those parents, to friends, neighbours, and colleagues. No news passed through so many hands was worth much, even as Molly normally participated happily in the rumour mill. When it came to her little darling, the idea of her dating several boys, one after the other, either didn’t register as possible or was passed off as less-than-serious experimentation.

“All of our children are growing up. And I think that he’s a polite lad.” Arthur felt a little bit out of his depth. “He’s friends with Harry. And his father was polite as well.” Molly still was sitting at the big kitchen table, her lips pursed, her hands constantly wringing. She didn’t seem to not be impressed with his attempt to help her come to terms with the fact that their little girl was growing
up to be a witch who drew the attention of others.

“Yes, well. That’s true. But she’s still so young!” Molly placed her elbows on the table and then let her face fall into her hands. What she said next came out pretty muffled. “And Fred and George are going to risk everything with that silly shop idea of theirs. Why can’t they do something more… serious? Something reliable and stable?”

Arthur flicked his wand at the teapot to set the water to heating. He was pretty sure that they would be here for some time more. Adjusting to their children being adults and finding their own way was hard on Molly. It was his duty as her loving husband to help her come to terms with the inevitable changes.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Still a bit of summer to go. And I think for the first time in the whole time I've been writing this story the time in the story almost matches with the date I'm publishing.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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For the first day of the summer holidays, it had been an early morning. But if Harry was honest, he hadn't expected anything different. Marcus had woken Harry up much too early, but as he had an appointment with Madame Goyle just after a normal breakfast time, it wasn't that inconvenient.

Currently they – Marvolo, Marcus, and Harry himself – were walking from a hidden backstreet, where Marvolo had apparated them to, all the way to the office where Madame Goyle usually met with her patients. And Marcus was already nagging.

"Why can't we just wait for Harry to be done? I want to go to the Zoo with him!" Marcus was skipping along, holding Marvolo's hand, and Harry just grinned. He wasn't exactly looking forward to the appointment, but he did look forward to a day spent with his godfather while Marvolo and Marcus visited the London Zoo.

"Because the idea of this appointments is that Harry gets to talk to Madame Goyle without anyone listening in. So she can help him with problems he might have that need talking about to be solved. And after that, Lord Black will pick him up," Marvolo explained – again – with more patience than Harry would have thought the man capable of just last summer. "And while Harry is off doing that, we're going to have a nice day in the Zoo looking at all the different animals, eating an ice cream or two, and generally having a good time."

Harry had suggested the Zoo as a place for his brother and father to go to, as he fondly remembered the first snake he had ever spoken to. And the summer was going to be long enough for more than one visit. If the way Marcus spoke with Nagini was any indication, he would be delighted to speak with more snakes.

They had to stop at a traffic light when it turned red. Next to them a woman with a girl – holding hands just as Marvolo and Marcus were doing – also waited for the lights to change, and for once Harry was sure that he wasn't looked at in disdain for his oversized, washed-out, and torn clothes. If anything their clothes screamed wealth.

"Can I also go to her, to talk without anyone listening?" Marcus asked suddenly, and Harry wondered if he actually understood what going to a therapist entailed, and why someone might want to do it.

"In principle, there's nothing that says you can't. But we'll have to ask her if she has time for another patient, and if she feels she is able to… take on our whole family." Harry noticed that their father quickly had changed tracks in there. Harry vaguely remembered that there were specialists for children as young as Marcus was. Madame Goyle had been Marvolo's first choice because she
was related to one of his Death Eaters – giving him a unique kind of leverage over the situation – and knowledge of the magical world and its existence. With Harry being a teenager when he started seeing her, the question of whether she had what was needed to work with small children hadn't come up.

Not that making a point of Marcus being a small child would go over well with him. He was finished with his first year of school, after all, and therefore no longer one of the small children. At least according to him, who declared those still in kindergarten babies.

"What's she called?" Marcus wanted to know as the lights turned green and they all started to cross the street.

"You mean her occupation?" Marvolo asked for clarification, getting a quick series of nods in answer, as Marcus insisted on walking quicker, passing by Harry to walk in front. "Therapist is what she has written on her door." Which was technically true, even though she would be called a mind-healer in the magical world. But they couldn't really say that when people around them – who probably were muggles – could hear.

And they were listening. Harry had seen the quick glance from the woman, assessing him, and now not only noticing the well-made clothing – tailored, just as everything else in his wardrobe – but also the fact that Harry was on his way to a therapy session. For a moment he wondered what she might be construing in her head as the reason he was going to a therapist. Was he a bored, idle student being dragged there to make him perform to his parents' expectations? Had he tormented an animal, or even a fellow student, getting off lightly because of their wealth? Or maybe she thought he was stressed out? Before Harry could descend ever deeper into what others might think of his consulting a mind-healer – the Dursleys certainly never had anything positive to say about those abnormal enough to need a psychoanalyst – he reminded himself of something he had learned since the first appointment. Asking for help was not a weakness. With all the bad reactions one had to fear, it required a lot of bravery to admit one needed help and to seek it out.

When Harry and his family turned left and the woman and the girl turned right, Harry could breathe more easily. It was unimportant what strangers thought of him. It was even unimportant what people he knew thought of him. It was harder than it should be to convince himself of that, but Harry knew it to be true. In this the only thing of importance was that Harry should do what was good for him. And going to speak with Madame Goyle was helping Harry deal with everything that kept happening in his life, as well as everything that already had happened.

And it sounded as if Marvolo thought it would be good for Marcus as well. "We'll ask her. And if she doesn't have time, she might know someone who does. How does that sound?"

Harry didn't listen, but followed behind them, thinking deeply, and relying on Marvolo to find the way.

Was there a reason for Marcus to go to therapy?

After a few moments Harry had to agree that it couldn't hurt. Marcus had been in the foster system, which wasn't ideal even though he hadn't ended up with uninterested families, nor had he been forced to change families too frequently. But he probably had had a few less-than-ideal experiences in his past, and more than likely would have complicated situations in his future.

"I really wanna go as well!" Marcus said in a tone Harry knew well enough to recognize that he had repeated that sentence more than once.

"And I have already said that we'll have to ask Madame Goyle. We can't just decide to take up her
time, Marcus." Judging by Marvolo's tone Harry had missed quite a few moments of back and forth over this.

They stepped through the door into the waiting area of the office. It was early enough that Harry was the first patient of the day, so the door to the actual office was open.

"Lord Slytherin, Harry, Marcus, good morning. Do come in." Just as always she was wearing a pencil skirt and a jacket, some make-up – somehow Harry had started to pay attention to things like that – and a smile.

"Good morning, Madame Goyle," Marvolo greeted, giving her a nod. "Before Marcus and I leave, I wanted to ask you to consider taking on Marcus as your patient as well. He would like to come speak to you, just as Harry and I do."

Madame Goyle turned to look at Marcus directly. "And you think that I could help you with a problem?"

Instead of answering, Marcus suddenly was shy, hiding behind Marvolo. Which wasn't as effective as it would have been if Marvolo had been wearing robes. Trousers weren't as good at blocking the line of sight.

"I'll think about it, Marcus. Come in Harry." With a wave Harry followed Madame Goyle into the office, being greeted by her tomcat weaving his way around his legs.

Then he sat down in the comfortable armchair, trying to relax. This was different than the room they had used off the hospital wing at Hogwarts.

"How was your start into the summer holidays, Harry?" Madame Goyle asked after she had settled down herself.

For a moment Harry wasn't sure he wanted to talk much today. Maybe drawing something would be easier. He could order his thoughts, find a point to start.

And then he simply started to talk, fiddling with the hem of his polo shirt. "I'm feeling bad for being jealous of Marcus. He gets to do so many things I never had a chance to try. But he should get to try those things. Right?" Before long Harry was talking and talking and talking. Tom the kneezle on his lap, purring, while he just rambled on and on. Their last meeting hadn't been long ago, but somehow there was a lot to talk about anyway.

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Instead of apparating them, Marvolo had decided to take the tube and wasn't sure it had been a good idea. They had gotten off at Camden Town and then had walked to the Zoo. And only the facts that Marcus had enjoyed taking public transportation and Marvolo did want his son to be able to move around in the muggle world without difficulty made the experience bearable. It simply had been too crowded for Marvolo to enjoy the travel.

Then they had bought tickets at the entrance to the Zoo and started to make their round. Determined to go to the reptile house last – there was no way they were going to go anywhere else once Marcus started to talk with the snakes there – Marvolo had turned them left, visiting the birds first. Between birds of prey, penguins, and parrots, Marcus had had many interesting animals to look at. After that they had looked at butterflies – not a favourite of Marcus – and bugs which had appealed a lot more to his son. The lions had been lazing around too much to keep a little boy's interest, and so he found himself now sitting on one bench of many lining a children's playground,
"Here alone?" another man sat down on the bench standing right next to the one Marvolo had settled on. Turning his attention to his seating neighbour – secure in the knowledge that he had put a tracking charm on Marcus before he had let him loose to play – Marvolo took in the sight of a muggle dressed much more casually than he himself was.

"No. My son is playing somewhere in there." Marvolo waved his hand at the interesting structure children were climbing around on.

The other man chuckled. "I'm waiting for my wife and our daughters. We agreed to meet here once they've found the ice cream they wanted to have." Without a clue why this stranger insisted on talking to him, Marvolo turned back to the playground under the pretence that he needed to keep an eye out for his son and his safety. "So you're giving your wife a nice day without the kid running around?"

Well aware of the usual roles assigned to women and men in this part of the muggle world, Marvolo refrained from rolling his eyes. He really had little to stand on here, there only had been one woman in his inner circle, and traditional families still expected the witches to take care of the children until they all were old enough to attend Hogwarts. For the most part, at least.

"There is no wife. My older son is back from school for the summer and visiting his uncle today. So I'm entertaining the younger one here. No need to let him feel left out." No need to give more information than needed to this random muggle, taking a more than passing interest in Marvolo's affairs.

For a moment there was only the sound of various animals, shrieking and laughing children, and off in the distance those of the city.

Then a woman and two girls approached their benches, talking with the man, obviously the wife and daughters he had spoken of. While they talked a mile a minute, even while eating their ice cream, Marvolo tried to enjoy giving Marcus an experience he hadn't gotten himself at that age.

He could remember quite clearly that when he had been relatively young – maybe four, or five – almost everyone at the orphanage had visited the Zoo. He had been banned from going as punishment for something. He didn't remember what it had been, only that he had known without a doubt that he hadn't done anything to deserve that punishment. Now, many decades later, Marvolo thought that he might have displayed an act of accidental magic without knowing that he had done so.

So maybe he had been responsible for whatever he had been accused of, but it still hadn't been something to be punished for.

Most likely, at least.

"Dad! Dad!" Marcus came running, a grin on his face, and sand on his knees. "There's a slide back there! And swings! Can you come and give me a push?" Small, sandy, hands were firmly gripping Marvolo's own, leaving sand all over his expensive trousers. Maybe going out in a fine three piece suit hadn't been the best idea. But when he wasn't able to wear robes, an old-fashioned, tailored suit was his clothing of choice. It basically was what wizards wore on a daily basis under their robes anyway.

"Sure I can. Lead the way!" Marvolo stood, happy to have an excuse to minimize his interaction with that stranger, and followed his son over to a few sets of swings, to give him the pushes he
After they had got the swing going, Marcus managed pretty well on his own, it just had been a little high off the ground for Marcus to give himself a good push to start out.

"Can we go see the snakes next?" Marcus asked with a look of concentration on his face, clearly still working out how a swing worked.

Giving a small sigh, Marvolo nodded. "I guess we can go see the snakes next. And all the other reptiles. But you know that they probably aren't as active as you would like. You know that they like to laze about." Better to remind Marcus of that fact than have a disappointed boy on his hands later.

"I'm sure I can get them interested!" Marcus was confident, and probably with good reason. There had yet to be a snake Marvolo met which was not excited to meet with a speaker.

And once they arrived at the reptile house Marvolo was proven right on both his suspicions for how this visit would go.

Every one of the snakes Marcus had looked at had been delighted to meet him and to speak with him. And the fact that Marcus didn't tire of hearing from them about their days – which were terribly mundane in Marvolo's opinion – led to a rather extended stay in this part of the Zoo.

In fact they stayed long enough here that the man, his wife, and daughters from earlier came in while Marcus was talking in low hisses with one of the pythons living here.

"Can't we just go and look at the penguins some more?" one of the girls asked in a whine that seemed well practiced.

"Or the monkeys!" her sister threw in from the side, slinking around clearly less than happy to go look at the reptiles.

"You both know how your father likes reptiles. We were everywhere you wanted to go, and now it's his turn picking what we'll look at." The mother tried to be stern but sounded mostly tired to Marvolo's ears.

."We never get live mice:. one python had just complained to Marcus while hanging leisurely from a branch that had been installed near the glass pane so people had a better chance to actually get to see the animals living here.

."I guess that's pretty boring then:. Marcus answered, commiserating with the snake.

To pass the time Marvolo walked from terrarium to terrarium, looking at the illustrations and informational texts hung by each of them. He did know a lot of the different types of snakes – he had made it a project of his to learn everything about snakes he could as soon as he had been old enough to go to school – but reading about the specific individuals here was something new and something to do while Marcus went about getting to know them all.

"It seems as if your boy thinks he can actually speak with snakes." There was a hint of derision in the muggle's voice, and Marvolo barely managed to refrain from rolling his eyes.

"A child's imagination is a wondrous thing," Marvolo said in a deceptively mild tone, it was even the truth. "He plays and has fun. Where is the harm in that?" And why did that man think it was his place to make fun of a child in this way?
The man huffed and moved on, clearly looking down on Marcus running over to Marvolo with shining eyes, starting to speak several paces before he actually had reached his father. "Do you think we can get the snakes here some live mice? It's boring to always just be getting dead ones!"

The girls made gagging noises in the background and Marvolo ignored them in favour of answering his son's question. "While they certainly would enjoy the variety in possible activity a live mouse would provide, I think it's not done to make sure that the mice are actually eaten by the snakes where a human can see and check that everything is alright."

Marcus nodded earnestly. "And they can't ask the snakes if they managed to catch the mice. So they can't let them run for the snakes to hunt?"

"That's correct." Because the muggles working here certainly couldn't ask the snakes anything. Happy with that explanation Marcus returned to his hissed conversations with the various snakes, running back and forth to carry messages between them with a happy smile on his face. He even insisted to say goodbye to each of them before they could leave when it was late afternoon.

Unwilling to once again brave the tube, Marvolo searched for a sheltered spot they could apparate from and took them home, where they would wait for Harry to return home from his visit to his godfather.

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A pitcher with ice cold lemonade was standing with two tall glasses on a table right next to the door, where Sirius could just make it out past Harry. He felt like he could drink something, but when he looked down on his hands, the amount of oil and grease on them advised against taking up his wand to summon it, or to walk around the motorcycle and pick up a glass without cleaning his hands first.

"Harry, could you please pour me a glass of lemonade?" Even while he posed his request, Sirius looked down in search of the rag he had been using to clean his hands from time to time.

He spotted the rag under the front tire of the bike, and bent down to pick it up. When Sirius came back up, Harry was still polishing one spot on the bike with his own rag and a far-away look on his face.

"Earth to Harry! Can you hear me?" Sirius waved one hand in front of his godson's face, a little concerned wondering what had the boy so distracted today. He had picked Harry up after his appointment with that mind-healer. Maybe something troubling had come up?

Blinking, Harry focused on the waving hand – still mostly covered in stains – and gave a tentative smile. "Sorry, I'm a little distracted. You wanted something?"

"Yes. Can you pass me a glass of lemonade, please? I'm parched." Still remembering how he had hated it to be pressured to answer when he had been Harry's age, Sirius debated if this was a case of let-it-go, or one where he needed to be persistent.

Being an adult and mostly responsible was hard.

"Here you go," Harry said, extending his hand holding a glass full with lemonade – made with limes and lemons – across the motorcycle for Sirius to take.

He did look good. Not drawn or pale, too thin or in any other way sickly. Sirius was also sure that there were no glamours on him hiding any marks or stuff like that. As the Lord of the family, the
wards around the house would have informed him about such magic. It always was an irritating itch in the back of his mind when someone vain enough to hide birthmarks or love bites with magic came over for a visit. But it was useful to make sure Remus wouldn't try to hide marks because he thought that bruise balms and healing potions were too expensive.

So, what was wrong? Because something clearly was on Harry's mind.

"Thanks. Take one for yourself as well." He grabbed the glass with his left hand, as he hadn't really managed to clean the right with the already pretty dirty rag.

Drinking while Harry filled his own glass with lemonade and drank, Sirius came to the conclusion that he couldn't ignore Harry's mood, but that he would not poke and ask, but make a few guesses and just ask.

"How is that girlfriend of yours? Everything fine?" Love troubles, as Sirius remembered quiet vividly, were frequently the reason for upset and worries when one was only just starting out. Not that that necessarily stopped when one was older.

"Luna?" Harry asked, face brightening – not love trouble, then – and setting the now empty glass back down, he started to talk in a dreamy voice. "We'll all be meeting this weekend. Theo has invited everyone to come visit him. It'll be the longest we've been apart since the spring Holidays. I think I'll write her before that, though. Ask her for a date. Do you think she would like going to the cinema? I don't even know what films are currently being shown. Do you think you could get me a program that's recent?"

At the end there Harry had gotten more and more excited and Sirius felt some of his worry ease. Whatever trouble was plaguing Harry's mind wasn't of an earth shattering consequence if he could get that lost and excited over planning a date with his girlfriend.

"You know that I'm taking a portkey over to meet Nawel and Enora later tomorrow, right? I'm pretty sure I told you not so long ago that I had arranged everything." And while he was nervous, he also was absolutely hyped to spend the summer with his daughters and get to know them better.

Harry blinked and blushed. "Oh, yeah. You did tell me that." There was a short awkward pause. "Do you think Remus would be willing to help?"

Sirius laughed and quickly bent forward to ruffle Harry's hair. "Oh, pup! I'm sure he will. I'll make sure to write a letter if he sleeps longer than usual and shouldn't be back home before I have to leave. No worries!"

For a moment Harry looked confused before understanding dawned on his face. "Oh, right. Today is the full moon! Hadn't thought of that."

"No problem, Harry. And I'm sure you could make Lord Slytherin buy a muggle newspaper to check what cinemas are playing what films at the moment." That image – Marvolo Slytherin going to a muggle to buy a newspaper – made Sirius grin and for a while the two of them worked in silence.

"Can I ask you something?" Harry sounded hesitant and Sirius suddenly was pretty sure that whatever had been on his godson's mind was about to be revealed.

"Sure you can." Had that been casual enough? Had it been too casual? He didn't want to appear uninterested.

"What do you think of the Oculus Sanus potion?" Harry tried to sound as if it wasn't really all that
important, but his tense posture and the light strain in his voice gave him away. Sometimes having grown up with a Slytherin family did have its advantages. That he had needed those long-thought-lost skills a lot in his role as Lord Black made it only easier to read his godson now. "Well, it's one of those that make one wonder why exactly it's banned in the first place. I know that your father never took it, and that the Weasleys would never use it. But otherwise it's still pretty common to use, as far as I understand."

"Really?" Harry sounded honestly surprised by that, which confused Sirius.

"Yes. I'm pretty sure I took one when I was about six. I think? Not sure. Why do you think so few witches and wizards actually wear glasses? There are, of course, transfiguration, and a few temporary charms. But I think mostly people get the potion. Even if they have to go out of the country to do so. It's an effective measure." Sirius shrugged, watching the other carefully.

"Huh. It sounded more rare when I heard of it for the first time." Harry shrugged and suddenly looked a lot more relaxed.

Had that been the problem?

"I think there aren't many left who can brew it here in Britain. But other parts of the world aren't as obsessed with such things as the Ministry has been in the past." He shrugged again and tried to remember what he had wanted to do next. Maybe he would find another motorcycle over at his daughter's home, leaving his baby back here somehow didn't feel right. "Can you pass me the wrench?"

The grass was pretty dry and the air filled with the sounds of crickets and the smells of dry plants, flowers, and small animals. The biggest animal that recently had wandered through this birch forest had been a fox.

Almost on its own, Remus' nose moved closer to the forest ground, sniffing in search of a trail. As Padfoot couldn't be here this night, Remus needed to find something to amuse himself with before he found himself a comfy spot of moss to sleep on.

Even as normally he preferred the presence of another during his transformations, Remus did understand that Sirius was going to travel to the home of his cubs, and needed the time.

Moony shook his head, and huffed. Even with Wolfsbane at hand – still provided by Severus and paid for by Lord Slytherin – his thought patterns were affected during the nights of the full moon. While it wasn't really a problem if Padfoot was with him, it did remind him that he wasn't willing to risk a human in his presence.

How much Dora did try to convince him it was safe notwithstanding.

He had offered her the arrangement Sirius and he had used during the winter, as it had been too cold to be outside the whole night. But she wasn't comfortable with the idea of the big, warded cast-iron cage. So Remus was here alone, and Dora was home with her parents, pouting.

And that when she, as an Auror, should know the rules for werewolves, what he had to do to comply with them, and what would happen if he didn't.

Shaking himself vigorously, loose hair flying in all directions, Moony tried to get rid of the gloomy thoughts. There was nothing he could do right here and now. But, he sniffed, it seemed it had been less than a few minutes that a rabbit had come through here.
Discarding all worries outside of the desire to catch that rabbit, Remus fell into a light trot, nose close to the ground, careful to be quiet as not to alarm the animal when he drew close.

oooOOooo

*Tuesday, 2nd of July 1996*

The rhythmic sound of the knife hitting the cutting board was kind of soothing. Sonja was sitting in the chair Severus had transfigured for her in his potions laboratory back home at the Manor. Not that it actually felt like home just yet, more like a dream, a wonderful dream she feared to wake from to realize it all had been just that.

Snuggling back into her blanket – it wasn't really all that warm here in the laboratory as Severus liked to have it cool – Sonja reminded herself that this was very much real. She was married, expecting a baby, and somehow had managed to become a Lady. Not that climbing the social ladder had been her aspiration at any time. But with Severus had come the family name of Price, including a title, a seat on the Wizengamot, and this manor with its many laboratories and wonderful gardens.

"What are you brewing?" Sonja asked her husband, closing the book she had been reading in favour of a talk with her love.

"A new batch of Oculus Sanus potion. Lord Slytherin sent a letter to ask for it. It seems that Mr. Slytherin has seen sense." There was a bite in that statement that by now probably was more habit than anything else. "But I guess I'll see when he returns to school for the next year."

Sonja frowned. "Occlumency lessons are over, then? Did he already make that much progress?" The lessons had gone on the whole school year, she had thought they would continue for much longer.

"He has learned enough for what he needs. He can control his temper and deflect attacks on his mind by an outside force. He doesn't need the ability to forge memories, lie to a Legilimens in his own mind, or resist torture and truth serums. He and I can spend our time more productively."

Severus placed the knife down, moving over to one of the sinks to clean it immediately.

"I guess that makes sense," Sonja conceded. Who would need to withstand torture and truth serums? Hopefully not a teenaged boy.

Placing her chin in her hand, smiling, Sonja couldn't resist and simply had to ask. "Do you think he'll manage to score high enough in his Potions exam to make it into your NEWT classes?"

Standing in front of one of the many shelves of potion ingredients – painstakingly ordered to Severus' specifications – Severus took his time answering, picking a few bottles from their places.

"I think he has the potential. Especially as he has taken more interest in his academic performance ever since he was adopted, and especially after he was re-sorted. But I guess we'll have to wait and see if he has managed to keep a cool head on his shoulders during the exam. Both written and practical."

It was funny how much Severus had changed his perception of the boy in question. The staff all around had told her many stories about how Severus had always ranted about Harry Potter, the celebrity, the attention-seeking brat, breaking the rules just because he could. And now here he was, her stubborn and proud love, admitting that there was potential in the son of James Potter.

Not that he ever would use those words. And Sonja also wasn't blind to what had been necessary
for her husband to see reason. The revelation of the harm the boy had suffered during his childhood under his muggle aunt's care – both through the potions he had had to take, and the fragments of memories Severus had seen during Occlumency lessons – had been instrumental in actually making Severus see reason.

Not that he had shared any specifics with Sonja. But one didn't need that to come to some specific conclusions after seeing the list of potions the boy had had to take.

Watching him work, all efficient motions and precision, Sonja thought back to the move here and the first evening they had spent making plans for the almost two months they would have here to themselves. They planned to put some finishing touches on all the potions Severus had worked on – he insisted she also had worked on them, planning to write her name onto all the publications – or at least the write-ups needed to publish and prepare for some more thorough testing. Especially for the Anteros Potion and the one testing familial connections and closeness. They had managed to get a few more tests in for the family connection potion, but the Anteros Potion needed another level of commitment for those willing to test it.

"Do you think we'll manage to dodge a few of those summer parties you've been grumbling about? I've seen the list of parties of past years, and there are quite a few we'll have to attend." She knew that Severus wasn't one for parties – indoors or otherwise – but she also knew that it was expected to attend them. She had decided to try softening him up a little bit in preparation. "We need to go to the Malfoy garden party. And I'm sure Lord Slytherin will organize something we'll totally have to attend." There was a sigh from Severus to that, which she could hear all the way over here over the bubbling sounds from the potion, and the slight scraping noise the stirrer made in the cauldron.

"Don't you think we can manage to get out of all the others on the grounds of not really knowing them, and your need to stay off your feet?" He sounded hopeful, and Sonja felt herself smirking.

"Not knowing them well is a reason to go, love. To get to know them. And as long as the healer doesn't say anything about staying in bed, I can stay off my feet perfectly fine at a nice garden party. There are things like benches and chairs, or even lounges." She laughed at him slumping his shoulders on purpose, exaggerating his movements. "If the Fudges organize a party, we'll have to go too. And the rest. Let's see. Shall we?"

"Maybe I'll get lucky and a few of the Potions conferences and meet-ups are going to take place on the same days as some of those social events." The disdain in those two innocent words was so thick that Sonja started to giggle, unable to stop until tears were running down her face and she was fighting for breath.

Suddenly Severus was standing right next to her chair, wand in hand, casting what Sonja guessed were diagnostic charms. "Are you feeling well, love?" The concern in his voice – he never sounded panicked, probably too much practice keeping his cool in a wide range of situations – sobered Sonja up pretty quickly.

"Yes. I'm fine. Don't worry." She placed one of her hands on Severus' arm, feeling her book slide down from the top of her leg to the side, lodging itself between her leg and the arm of the chair. "You're just too funny."

The face Severus made to that claim sent Sonja laughing again, making him scowl for real. Getting herself under control again, Sonja pushed him a little on the arm. "Get back to brewing, or do you want to have to start over because you let yourself be distracted by your wife?"

"Dastardly woman." Severus scowled, but when he turned she saw that scowl morph into a soft smile.
Fishing her book out from between the fold of her blanket, and the small space between her leg and the chair's arm, Sonja made herself comfortable again, going back to reading a manual on high society and the expected customs and manners. She wasn't ignorant, but not as knowledgeable as she wanted to be, either. Reading would get her a point to start. Once the child was born, there would be no more reason to avoid throwing some social functions herself. Sighing to herself, she went back to her reading.

ooooOOooo

Malcolm had known that being a family healer would be different from work at St. Mungo's when he had chosen to walk that path. The fact that he would be able to set his own working hours, within reason, and therefore be able to coordinate better his work as a healer for different families, and for the Death Eaters and his Lord, had been the deciding factor. But now, this very moment, the little quirks of being the healer for a whole family made it clear that this was absolutely the right thing for him.

"You're in good shape, Lord Slytherin," Malcolm started his assessment after a long look at the ritual's results. "If you keep up the duelling practice, there's no need to reduce the consumption of sweets, or otherwise chance your diet, my Lord." In fact Malcolm was surprised at how little the intake of sugar seemed to impact the Dark Lord's health. He started to gather up the ritual stones from where they had been placed on various places of the Dark Lord's body, putting them back on a small table because he would need them again soon.

While he worked he kept a tight leash on his features to keep up a friendly and professional mask. There in one corner of the nice room they were using sat Heir Slytherin, his younger brother on his lap. The boy displayed a curious mixture of curiosity, wariness, and boredom, while the older brother was grinning, his arms around the squirming boy. This wasn't the first time Malcolm had to work to gain the trust of a child, and he knew that letting them see the procedure helped a lot in that regard. That was why the Dark Lord had gone first, and his heir would be next.

"That's good to know," the Dark Lord said, sitting up, and rubbing his hands together. "I guess then I can get dressed again?"

"Of course, sir. You may get dressed again." Only long practice kept Malcolm from flinching at his audacity at correcting the Dark Lord. There was no reason to fear retribution. It had been a long while since the Dark Lord had passed out any punishments without a valid reason – being the last to arrive didn't count as valid in Malcolm's eyes – and he wouldn't do so in front of his sons. Or at least not in front of his younger son, as Malcolm was anything but sure about how much Henry Slytherin-Potter did or didn't know.

Lord Slytherin got up from the padded table-bench hybrid – transfigured for this visit – and picked up his trousers to get dressed, smirking in a way that made Malcolm nervous.

"Harry, maybe you could already change into the other shirt?" It took some convincing for Marcus Slytherin to get up so that Henry could start to change for his own exam.

When the boy was seated, ready for the ritual, Malcolm walked over and turned his back to the corner where now Lord Slytherin was seated on the chair, his younger son snuggled up against his chest.

"I assume that you have taken your potions as you were supposed to, Henry?" At the beginning of the meeting the teenager had asked to be called by his given name, citing the cumbersome length of his full name and titles as the reason.
"I did take what appeared with my meals, Healer Greengrass." The prim and proper way the boy was sitting there made Malcolm smirk, trying to be a good role model could do that to a child.

"That's good. Any problems since the last holidays?" He didn't really expect to hear a positive answer to that. If there had been any trouble, the Dark Lord would have made sure to have Malcolm at hand the evening the train came back to London.

"No problems, sir. I'm enjoying my summer." The boy was smiling, visibly more relaxed in the plain linen shirt, waiting to be told to lie down for the diagnostic ritual to begin. What a change from last summer and the very first examination.

"Then please lie down." While the teenager did as told, Malcolm once again started to explain what he was doing and why before he started to place the rune inscribed stones on their places on the boy's body. The glimpses he got from the little boy were entertaining, and distracting. There weren't that many children Malcolm had met who were this interested in the healing arts.

Once again the ritual was quickly finished, and Malcolm looked over the sheet of parchment with the results. They were encouraging. "You can stop using the potions to combat the damage you sustained in your early childhood, and your old breaks have healed nicely, too. I can confidently say that you're in good health, Henry."

"Thanks." Suddenly the boy was nervous, which made Malcolm curious. Did he want to ask something he wasn't comfortable with in front of his father and younger brother? "My eyes didn't change, did they?"

"No, they're still the same. Why do you ask?" Maybe he should check the prescription for the glasses? If his patient had noticed a change, that might be a good idea.

"I'm debating if I should take the potion to correct the problem. It's easier than constantly having to keep track of the glasses, but well, I wanted to make sure it's still an option." Henry shrugged, clearly uncomfortable.

Cutting the boy some slack, Malcolm smiled and waved for him to get dressed again. "There were no changes, so you still can take the potion to get your eyesight corrected if you so desire."

"Thank you." Henry Slytherin-Potter dressed again in his fashionable light summer clothes – trousers, a shirt, and open robes – and made room for his younger brother who had changed into a linen shirt of his own with the Dark Lord's help.

According to his previous experiences, this exam was going to follow one of a few distinct patterns. Either he would have to answer more questions than was reasonable, he would have to coax the boy every step of the way, or he would be so fidgety and twitchy that they would have to start over more than once.

Hoping for a barrage of questions, Malcolm waved the small child over. "And now let's have a look at you. Shall we?"

oooOOooo

Wednesday, 3rd of July 1996

As usual she had worked until late in the evening. So it was rather late in the morning when Rita came out of her bathroom, wrapped in her favourite dressing gown, fluffy slippers on her feet, and hair wrapped around rollers to make sure her colour potion could get the right amount of time to soak in.
Her copy of the Prophet was already on her kitchen table, and with a few waves of her wand, she had toast with honey, a steaming cup of freshly brewed tea, and an egg boiled just right ready to eat. She would have preferred a full English breakfast, but as she didn't have a house-elf, she would have to make it herself, and she certainly hadn't the patience for that.

Especially not while she was hungry.

Not really interested in anything else, Rita opened the twine holding the Prophet rolled up, and placed the now opened newspaper next to her plate, sipping on her tea. Just as was proper, her article occupied the whole front page, with only a few smaller notices below the fold.

To make sure that none of the idiots working the presses had mangled any of her writing, Rita started to read her own article detailing the upcoming trial of the Howler Terrorist Amos Diggory.

She had worked hard on this one. As Mrs. Diggory had been too shielded by her family, Rita hadn't managed to get an official interview with her. And it would have been so wonderful to get something from the woman who should have noticed something was wrong! But spying in her animagus form hadn't revealed much that would have been usable. In fact, she had only learned that Mrs. Diggory had fallen into a deep depression, barely taking part in daily activities at her brother's house.

With nothing usable from that side, Rita had moved on to speak with the people who had worked with Amos Diggory at the Ministry, and old schoolmates. Those had been better resources to cite, because they all had been eager to bring up the questionable things Amos had done and said over the years. It was always so easy to write something worthy of the front page when people were trying to distance themselves from former friends.

A good sob-story – like the one she had written last summer about Lord Slytherin – was a close second, but it always was more fun to expose the dirty deeds of esteemed figures of society.

And Amos Diggory had been that, respected, hardworking, and reliable. And because of that perceived image of the man, his fall into darkness was so interesting for everyone.

Rita would have to make sure that she would get one of the few press places during the trial. This was too good a scoop to let some lesser reporter cover it. And in the line of that work, she might get enough information to write a follow-up piece on story about the tragic upbringing Lord Slytherin. While she was pretty sure she would be better off in the long run painting him as a wizard trying his best, there was more to write there than had been done so far. Probably because everyone remembered how vicious He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had been in the past, and no one dared to take position for or against him in the press, as public perception on the man was so divided and hard to predict.

With the orphan among muggles background, the adoption of another orphan in that little boy – adopting the boy he had made into an orphan could go either way if one was skilled with words – and other efforts to repair all the damage done, Lord Slytherin had a positive angle to take in a story. But with all the murders, the blood prejudices, association with dark creatures people generally feared, and connection to Dark Magic, there was a lot of resentment still present in the knowledge and memories of the public.

It was like dancing on a volcano.

Humming happily to herself, Rita finished up her breakfast and went about getting ready for the day. She had some preparations to make.
I hope I did the Zoo of London no disservice with my superficial portrayal. I only had information found on the web at hand, never have been there myself. Maybe I get to go sometime in the future.

And here after a long pause a new story recommendation: "Conditionally" by Lomonaaren on both ffnet and AO3, a not your typical Severus is Harry's father story, completed.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Wednesday, 3rd of July 1996

It was late evening and Severus really would have preferred to be at home at the manor. But he was here in London at his Lord’s behest.

“Please wipe your finger down with the alcohol soaked cloth, Heir Slytherin-Potter.” Severus pointed to the cloth he had prepared when he had set up his workstation in the small potions laboratory at Griffin House.

Without asking any inane questions, the boy picked up the cloth with his right, before cleaning the index finger of his left hand. Clever of him to let his non-dominant hand be pricked for the blood needed, even though it wasn’t strictly necessary. Severus was perfectly capable of casting a simple healing charm after the deed was done.

When Severus had moved the pre-brewed potion into a small glass goblet – one overly elaborately decorated piece, gold leaf and the engraved Potter crest – and looked up, the boy was holding out his hand for Severus to take the few drops of blood needed to make the Oculus Sanus work.

Taking a sure grip on the offered hand, Severus moved it so that the blood would fall directly into the goblet and therefore the potion. With his other hand he picked up a needle – made from silver – and looked up to the green eyes behind the glasses which would soon no longer be needed. “Brace yourself.”

As he had gotten the consent from both the boy and Lord Slytherin, who was reading a bedtime story to his other son – a strange concept Severus was ignoring for the moment – Severus simply stabbed the needle into the finger and then pressed on both sides to encourage a drop of blood to form. It fell into the middle of the goblet and dispersed with a small flash of colour, changing the potion’s colour into a bright blue, almost like robin’s eggs.

“Episkey.” The small puncture wound was healed in just a fraction of a second, and Severus let go of the boy’s hand. “Take the goblet up with you and drink it just before you lay down to sleep.” Severus almost automatically fell into a lecturing tone. That many years of teaching had left behind some serious side effects. “That way you’ll sleep through the changes the potion will induce. Tomorrow morning you should be able to see clearly without your glasses. Please inform your father if that is not the case.” It was really a fairly simple potion, if not for the ridiculous Ministry ban on all potions using blood in this manner. “Any more questions?”

Looking up from the potion, the boy shook his head, even as he still looked as if he had a myriad of questions.
Severus sighed. “You should ask your questions, Mr. Slytherin. Taking a potion when you still have questions about it is not the best plan of action. So ask away.” Teenagers and their dramatics.

“It’s silly, sir,” the boy all but mumbled, looking back down.

“Ask anyway.” Really, why did teenagers insist on being this difficult?

“How does it taste, do you know?” The boy was blushing and Severus had to agree that it was a silly question. But he had been the one to insist that the boy ask, so he couldn’t very well mock him now, regardless of how many taunts came to mind.

“I never took it myself, but all descriptions claim that it has a slightly metallic taste.” If that was the only question the boy had to ask, Severus’ chances of getting home soon were good. Sonja was waiting for him, and he looked forward to reading her some sonnets.

“That’s not too awful then. Thank you, sir. For all the trouble you went through to brew this. And for the explanation. Have a nice holiday, sir.” Severus watched with narrowed eyes as the boy took the goblet into two careful hands. Looked as if he really knew when and how to take care.

“You as well, Heir Slytherin-Potter.” It was still hard to adjust to the change in their interactions. Here in this moment their roles weren’t as defined as they were at school – where they were teacher and student – or at a Ministry function – where the boy was heir to two families and he himself Lord and Head of his family – was he Lord, Potions Master, or the boy’s professor?

The boy walked out, probably up to his bedroom, and Severus started to pack away his few supplies. The Dark Lord had told him not to wait for him – bedtime stories could take some time, or so Severus assumed – and Severus had no problem following that order.

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Thursday, 4th of July 1996

Holidays were great. Draco couldn’t sleep in as he did whenever he could on the weekends at Hogwarts, but he had a room to himself, and he could fly without having to adhere to the training schedules of four teams. Getting to eat his favourites for breakfast with his parents in the same room – the more informal family dining room – was a nice change of pace, too. As much as he loved the Great Hall at Hogwarts, and felt it a nice change of pace at the start of each year, it simply got to be normality by the time the year neared its end.

This year was different though. With his little sister always being around their mother, Draco had gotten to see more of her than he had wanted to. Just now he concentrated on his plate, as Cassiopeia got her own meal directly from mother. Draco had known intellectually that nursing babies was normal, even considered especially beneficial for a child’s development. Seeing it happen, though, was different somehow. But he would learn to cope with the awkwardness of seeing his mother feeding the baby.

Suddenly tea was splattered over the table, and Draco turned in his seat to look at his sputtering and coughing father, the Daily Prophet opened to the society pages in front of him on top of the plate, the tea cup turned over on its side.
“Dear, what's wrong? Are you well?” His mum was quickly out of her seat, baby pressed against her side, rushing over to Draco’s father, leaving Draco floundering.

An elf was called to care for Cassiopeia, and a flurry of spells cast by Narcissa on her husband. Pretty sure that whatever had caused such surprise for his father had been something in the Prophet, Draco snatched the newspaper for himself to read.

He didn’t need to search for long as the headline of the article drew attention on the spot.

**Most eligible bachelor still free**

Almost a year ago Lord Marvolo Slytherin made his way back into society and has managed to find his footing rather well in the time since then. He has adopted two distant relatives into the Slytherin family, taking care of two vulnerable boys who had no one before Lord Slytherin took them in. The Potter assets are in a better state then since the last Lord Potter died. He is even involved in a reform of the Auror training program.

But all those endeavours have left him no time to find a suitable partner. And so the handsome Lord is still single to this day.

Not that there's a lack of candidates! Don’t think our fair witches didn’t show interest! For one there is Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and godmother of the younger Slytherin boy. Both her roles enable her to spend considerable time with Lord Slytherin. There’s also the fact that they have been seen in the Floating Candle, eating, just the two of them. Maybe they simply are very good at hiding?

Or maybe our reborn wizard, who’s looking much younger than one would expect, is out for someone younger? During the winter holiday season he was seen flirting with Quidditch Players. The Holyhead Harpies and also the witches from all the other teams in the league might have a chance at snatching up this delectable wizard.

Draco skipped to the end of the surprisingly long article to see who had a death wish. Rita Skeeter had been the one to write the scandalous article, and Draco nodded to himself as that sounded credible. That woman had a tendency to write the most polarizing articles she could compose with only marginal references to the facts. One only needed to look at the articles that witch had written during the Tournament, the way she had concentrated on Harry, ignoring the other champions… she really was without fear.

“Thank you, my love.” Lucius still sounded hoarse but was no longer coughing. “I'm fine now. I hope that my reaction didn’t frighten you.”

“You did frighten me for a moment, dear. What did you read to get such a reaction?” Knowing that his mother would probably want to read the article herself, Draco picked up the Prophet folded it so the article was on the top and held it out to her, as she settled back in her seat. “Thank you, Draco.”

He returned his concentration to his breakfast, trying to come up with a plan for the day, around the homework he had to do. Luckily lessons in politics and the dancing and manners lessons for Harry and Hermione he was helping with wouldn’t start until next week. All his planning didn’t
prevent him from listening to his parents' discussion, though.

“Is she really insinuating that Lord Slytherin and Lord Black might end up married?” His mother sounded incredulous and almost amused.

“She is.” His father sounded resigned. “I’m not sure how to prevent the Dark Lord from taking revenge on that reporter for her… wild speculation.”

Finishing up his tea, Draco looked up from his plate. “May I be excused? And would it be agreeable for me to visit with Theodore today?”

“Ask first.” His father answered, still looking less than perfect, his hair mussed from his earlier coughing fit. “Enjoy your day, Draco.”

“I will, father.” Draco said, getting up and leaving the room. He was curious how the Dark Lord would react to that article, but it was a morbid curiosity. Not knowing might be better in this instance.

HARRY FELT INEXPLICABLE NERVOUS AS HE ACCEPTED HIS BACKPACK WITH ALL HIS SUPPLIES FROM THE DRIVER MARVOLLO HAD HIRED FOR THIS FIRST DAY. THERE WAS NO ONE HERE WHO WOULD KNOW WHO HARRY WAS. THIS WAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO GET TO KNOW PEOPLE WITHOUT ALL OF HIS BACK STORY – FROM THE HOOLIGAN IMAGE THE DURSLEYS HAD PAINTED OF HIM, TO THE POOR ORPHAN ADOPTED BY THE FORMER EVIL DARK LORD THE MAGICAL WORLD KNEW OF – GETTING IN THE WAY.

And maybe that was contributing to Harry’s nerves. He wanted to get this right. And what would it say about him if it went wrong?

Taking a deep breath to calm himself down, Harry nodded to the driver – as far as he had understood, a near-Squib offering taxi-like services to magical folks – and attempted a smile. “Thank you. You’ll be waiting somewhere around here when the lesson is over?”

“I’ll be here. See you in four hours.” As had been Marvolo’s instructions before he allowed Harry to leave, the man didn’t use any names or titles. Marvolo had cited security reasons, and Harry didn’t feel he had any grounds to argue.

“See you!” Harry waved, shouldered the bag, and started to walk up the stairs into the school building the art class was going to take place in. Before he reached the door, Harry got out a piece of notebook paper where he had written down directions and the number of the room he had to find.

When he made it to the room on the second floor, a man was puttering at the front of the room, and a few people were sitting on chairs in front of empty easels. Muttering a greeting, Harry walked in and sat down at one of the still unoccupied places nearer to the back, and with a clear view of the door. All the talk about security had made Harry twitchy.

Next to each easel was a small table, and Harry started to remove his supplies from the bag and arrange them on the table in a way that seemed practical, his sketchpad and coal pieces in the middle at the front.
“Hi, is this place taken?”

Harry turned to the girl who had spoken, and nodded, then shook his head, feeling a little surprised. She had nice long hair and a lean figure, and was wearing a short skirt combined with a form-fitting t-shirt.

“There’s no one sitting there yet,” Harry clarified his confusing, non-verbal answer, feeling his face go hot. Blushing in this situation, how mortifying.

“Thank you.” Her answer was accompanied by a dazzling smile, before she turned and started to unpack her own supplies.

“Alright everybody!” the teacher called, clapping to gain everyone’s attention. It grew quiet in the room and all ten students turned to face the front of the class. “Welcome! My name is Phil Wilson, but please call me Phil. I’m an art teacher and have given courses like this one for several years now. I see that we have a very wide age range in this course.” He smiled at them all, and Harry silently agreed with the man. The oldest student had white hair already, and the girl who had sat down right next to Harry might be a few years older than he. “Let’s start with an introduction round: your name, age, what you normally do, what you hope to learn in this course. Stuff like that.” He waved at the man – older, almost bald, and dressed casually in shorts and polo shirt – sitting right up front at the wall with the windows, indicating that he should start.

The man turned a little in his chair so that he could see everyone and started to talk. “I’m Connor Roberts. Normally I work in accounting. I started art as a way to decompress after a long day at work. My wife arranged this as a birthday present.” Harry stopped to listen as he worked not to panic. He would need to talk about himself. What should he say? He had to keep magic a secret. He needed to say something to keep the others from being suspicious, but also needed to keep a lot of his life secret. The name was easy enough, but everything else? It had been ages since he had interacted socially for any length of time with muggles. If he didn’t count Hermione’s parents. And that hadn’t been long. A few minutes at most, all in all. And the Dursleys didn’t count. They just didn’t.

“My name’s Emily, I’m seventeen, almost finished with school. I want to take art history once I start university. So I thought taking some art classes would be a good preparation.” She smiled, brightly and Harry took measured breaths to calm down.

“My name is Harry.” He had been registered as Harry Black for the course, with Sirius’ smug approval, but if he didn’t need to give a last name, then he wouldn’t. “I’m fifteen. I gained an interest in art just recently, and I want to get accepted into the art class at my school,” another part of his life he needed to be vague about. “The professor for that class recommended for me to take some classes during the holidays.” He hadn’t lied, which was a good way to start in Harry’s opinion. Fewer chances to slip up later.

“My name is Bethany, Beth.” The woman behind Harry started to speak, she somehow reminded Harry of Mrs. Weasley, with her warm smile and kind eyes. “I take courses in oil painting regularly throughout the year. It’s a lot more fun to work surrounded by people than to do it alone at home.”

Only two more students needed to speak before they all had introduced themselves, and Phil once again brought his hands together with a loud sound – Harry was sure that would get on his nerves eventually – and drew everyone’s attention back to himself.

“Thank you, and welcome to you all. Today and tomorrow we’ll work on deciding and sketching what you want to work on. I’ll explain a few general basic techniques first, and then you can take a look at some of my art catalogues and books.” He indicated a stack of said items he had stacked on
Harry took notes of how oil paints were made – he had an interest in creating his own to incorporate some magical properties – and also took note of the colour theory that Phil explained along the way, together with some pigments used throughout history. Phil’s way of explaining things was kind of confusing, jumping from one topic to the next. But the man had a lot of passion for art, which made listening to him easier.

Soon, or at least it felt soon to Harry, everyone was walking around, picking up some of the books, searching for an idea of what to do for their class project.

“What are you going to pick?” Emily asked, as she sat down at her place, setting down two books on cubism in front of her.

“I think maybe a still life, attempting to get something realistic.” Harry wasn’t really interested in abstract art. Well, it was interesting to look at, but he wanted to get a Master of Magical Art to take him on after school. As far as he knew, there was no abstract magical art.

“Which school is yours?” Emily was idly flipping pages, but she didn’t seem to concentrate on what she was seeing.

“What do you mean?” Food and plants seemed to be a staple of still life paintings.

“Well, which school here in London do you attend? I haven’t seen you around, and even if you’re a bit younger, I feel we should have met before now.” For a moment Harry was stumped. Why would she expect to know him? London was a big city with more than a few schools. Then it dawned. He was once again in expensive clothing, and all his materials were expensive. She had seen that and concluded that his family was rich. There probably were fewer schools in London favoured by the rich, than normal ones. That would make meeting the kids of other rich families more likely. And that wasn’t even taking social functions, and rich neighbourhoods, into account.

“I’ve been attending a private boarding school ever since I was eleven. Our family is rather reclusive. What school are you attending?” Harry really didn’t want to talk about himself. maybe getting her to talk about herself would help.

“The Godolphin and Latymer School.” She laughed and touched Harry on his shoulder, going for playful, making Harry blush more, even as he felt kind of nervous. “But don’t try to change the topic. Do you really call your teachers professor?”

“Yes.” Harry felt a little out of his depth, looked up from the pile of apples he currently was studying, and felt mortified when he got a good look at more cleavage than he had expected and his body reacted.

Not that he didn’t know a teenager’s body could react to the slightest stimulus – robes were a godsend in that regard – but he had a girlfriend and didn’t even know this girl, and she was older!

“That’s odd!” She laughed again, leaning a little in Harry’s direction, prompting him to move his chair a little away from her.

“It’s the way it is. Your school probably has some odd traditions as well. Right?” Harry was really confused right now, and wanted to get some sketching done before the lesson was over. Maybe he should do some herbs and plants drying. Some of the more mundane potion ingredients maybe.

“How are you two doing?” Phil had made his way to where Harry and Emily were sitting, smiling with his hands clasped in front of his belly. “Need any help?”
“I’m thinking about a still life, drying herbs, and a few fresh ones, maybe some tools. Any ideas for a composition, or example from one of your books?” Maybe Emily would leave him be when he was obviously working.

“Interesting idea. Do you know which plants you want to paint? And what tools would match that scene? I have a book on classical proportions at the front, maybe you can look through those and try a few sketches. I’ll bring some references for plants tomorrow. But I fear I don’t have a lot in that direction. You could take a photograph of what you envision and use it as a reference.”

“Thanks, Phil. I think I can get everything I need to stage a photograph for a reference. We have an extensive herb garden.” And a well stocked potions laboratory, but he wouldn’t say that out loud.

“That’s good! Start on your sketches, and don’t hesitate to call if you have any questions. Now, Emily, I will take the risk and hazard a guess: you want to work on a cubistic piece?”

“Yes. I prefer abstract art.” It seemed Emily had taken the hint as she now concentrated on her own sketch and search for what she wanted to do during the coming two weeks.

It was a content and tired Harry who returned home that evening, most of his supplies left at the school, where they would stay until the course was over.

oooOOooo

It had taken him a while to decide if he should even search out his Lord. But in the end Lucius had decided that it was within his responsibility to offer his assistance and ask for his Lord's wishes in this. And Narcissa had agreed, a lot less worried about the Dark Lord cursing any of his followers in retribution after all the changes the man had displayed in his actions.

First Lucius had tried to find his Lord at Griffin House, but there had only been the squib nanny – maybe that arrangement was a better choice than a house elf to take care of a toddler – and the younger son of his Lord.

So Lucius had apparated to Headquarters, which hadn’t seen much use lately, in search of his Lord.

The place was much cleaner than it had been in the beginning, or the last time Lucius had been here for one of the training sessions the Dark Lord asked them to take part in, and while he walked confidently down the hall, the sound of breaking pottery or china got clearer and clearer.

The racket came from the training room – one of the ballrooms cleaned out for meetings and their duelling sessions – and when Lucius dared to step in, after casting a shield charm around himself he spotted the Dark Lord.

He was a spectacular sight. Robes flaring around him with each movement, red eyes blazing, hair bound back with a simple tie, pale wand a blur in the air because of the fast spellcasting. And the number of figurines, cups, plates, and amphorae the Dark Lord was conjuring only to blast them to smithereens and dust in the next instant was more than impressive.

But it was also a testament of great stress or anger. The Dark Lord always had had a tendency to violence to cope with stress, anger, and frustration.

Blasting curses at breakable objects were a method of stress relief Lucius found preferable to
casting the cruciatus at his brethren and himself.

His hunch that the Dark Lord was incensed by the article written by Skeeter seemed to have been correct.

Suddenly all noise ceased, and the dust started to settle.

“Lucius, what a surprise. How may I help you?” The Dark Lord slid his wand away in a fluid movement, carefully stepping over some shards on the floor on his way to where Lucius was standing.

He dropped his shield charm, and bowed in greeting. “My Lord, I came here to ask how I may serve you.”

“Was there a specific reason you came here today to ask such?” There was an amused glint in those red eyes – still hard to look at for Lucius, and not only because his Lord was such a good Legilimens – and he was pretty certain that his Lord knew exactly why he had come here today.

But there was nothing for it, here the Dark Lord was Lucius' liege, the man he owed his allegiance to, not a fellow Lord in the Wizengamot he could banter with. “There was, my Lord. I saw the article Rita Skeeter had in the Prophet this morning and wanted to ask what stance you would like me to take on such insinuations and invasion of your privacy.”

The Dark Lord walked past Lucius, waving for him to follow, and seemed unfazed by the question. They ended up in the small study the Dark Lord used regularly for the smaller meetings with only one or two of his Death Eaters, seated on both sides of the massive desk.

“Tea?” Lucius nodded to that casual question a little bewildered. “Henbane. Tea for two and a few of those little pastries, please,” the Dark Lord asked off the air, obviously addressing an elf, as a serving tray with tea, milk and sugar, two cups, and a plate filled with little pastries appeared only a few moments later

The Dark Lord took his time preparing his tea, waving at Lucius to do the same, and sat back once there was a huge amount of sugar thoroughly mixed in with the tea.

“I’m not sure what to do, Lucius. It was invasive, that is true, but it was kind of positive. Wasn’t it? She did paint me as a desirable wizard to marry, doing good for our society…” he trailed off, took a sip from his tea, and shrugged elegantly. “I don’t want to marry anyone, but what should I do to stop her from speculating? I honestly have no idea and am open to suggestions.”

Lucius took a sip from his tea as well and then selected one of the pastries. “I’m not sure what you could do, my Lord. I guess that depends on what your goal is. Keeping Miss Skeeter happy and writing positive if invasive articles is one way to keep up a good reputation in the public’s eye. There aren’t many ways to keep her from writing such stories and keep her happy, though. She tends to tear down those that make her unhappy or give a better story painted in a bad light than in a good one. She’s going to demand an interview, and soon.”

The way the Dark Lord sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose at that proclamation was so human that Lucius felt like pinching himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. Maybe he could help his Lord learn how to field questions from Rita Skeeter. “May I make a proposal?”

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It had taken longer than he had anticipated to finish all his paperwork and preparation for the Wizengamot meeting this month, so Marvolo stood from his desk well past midnight, stretching and making his back pop to work out the kinks. Casting all those spells to work out his frustrations and then spending the rest of the afternoon being coached by Lucius on how to handle the press hadn’t been as much fun as he had hoped to have this afternoon.

Time to go to bed. Nagini had left the study hours earlier with a huff, stating she was going to curl up with the bubbly hatchling.

Marvolo was at the bottom of the stairs when he heard someone, or something, walking around, maybe coming up from the kitchen? He turned back and heard the person – definitely a person – walk up the stairs from the ground floor. As the wards hadn’t tilled and the footsteps were too heavy to be caused by Marcus, it had to be Harry. But why was he still up?

“Harry? Is everything alright?” Marvolo was looking down at his son, wearing a dressing gown over his light pyjamas, holding a mug with something hot in it, judging by the curls of vapour coming from the surface.

“Can’t sleep,” Harry answered, carefully balancing the cup, and shrugging with only one shoulder. “So I thought getting myself some warm milk might help.”

“You know that you could just have asked Flimm to get you some, right?” There was something more there than Harry was telling. Why had the boy trouble finding sleep?

“I know. But I wanted to get out of bed. Fetching it myself felt like the best idea.” Harry shrugged again and reached the last step, no longer forcing Marvolo to look down on him.

“What is troubling you? I thought you had a pleasant day at your first art class.” Deciding that they wouldn’t have a conversation in the hall just at the top of the stairs, Marvolo gently placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder to steer him towards the parlour.

Harry followed willingly enough, sighing, but not actually talking before they had settled down in the comfortable seats around the fireplace that burned brighter just moments after they had settled down.

“There was this girl. She sat down next to me. Wanted to talk all the time, was asking a lot of questions. I think she was trying to flirt? And it was confusing, and I’m not sure… “ Harry blushed a scarlet red and Marvolo was getting a bad feeling about this. That sounded as if Harry needed some advice on how to handle attraction and his relationship with Miss Lovegood, and Marvolo did not feel confident in any of those fields.

“You’re not sure?” Marvolo prompted. Even feeling out of his depth, this was his duty as a parent. He had known that and he had accepted everything that came with being a father.

“I’m not sure why I reacted… and she’s pretty. Why would I think she’s pretty when I’m in love with Luna? Am I in love with Luna?” Harry looked so lost and confused right now, and Marvolo didn’t feel he was the best person to help him sort his thoughts out, but Lord Black wasn’t in London, not even in Britain, so he had to do.

“I can’t claim to have any experience in any of this. But I think I might be able to help you anyway,” Marvolo started, folding his hands and leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees. “Correct me if I get something wrong. That girl took the place next to you, and she tried to flirt and
kept trying to engage you in a conversation?” Harry nodded, took a sip from his milk but didn’t say anything. “Did that feel good? Were you happy that she was showing an interest in you?” Marvolo remembered quite vividly the annoying hours his classmates had spent teasing each other over the girls, and who might have had a chance to gain a girl’s attention and how they might force that attention.

“No.” Harry sounded unsure. “Once I realized what she was doing, I tried to get her to stop by pretending to be absorbed in my work.” Obviously Harry was sure about that. “But the other... thing...” Blushing teenagers were kind of adorable, but also confusing. Of course Marvolo knew that there was a lot of shame and guilt around sexuality in large parts of society – both muggle and magical – but it was frustrating, because it made his own place so much harder as well.

“I’m pretty sure that if I were to get Healer Greengrass here and ask him, he would tell you that teenage boys quite frequently have such reactions with almost no stimulation or reason at all.” Harry was blushing even more now. “There is no reason to assume that you don’t love Miss Lovegood just because a girl flirted with you and your body had a reaction you had no way of controlling.”

Now Harry was blushing and glaring at Marvolo. “You know, that’s not actually helpful,” he huffed, emptied his mug of milk and set it down on the table, where it promptly vanished.

“I told you that I’m not good with romantic relationships. You could talk with your godfather. He has a lot more experience.”

“That’s not easy with the time difference,” Harry answered despondently, fiddling with the hem of his dressing gown.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. Maybe speak about your girlfriend to make the other girl back off? And if I remember correctly, you’ll be seeing her on Saturday?” He needed to speak with those of his followers who were parents. Maybe they had some more hints for him on how to handle teenagers and their problems.

“Yes, we’ll meet at Theo’s. I’m looking forward to that.” Now Harry was smiling. Maybe distraction was the best way to help his son find the peace of mind to get to sleep.

“How did your project to make a mockup for your project go?” Marvolo had only seen a glimpse of what Harry had set up in the potions laboratory, but it had seemed interesting.

“Yes! It worked rather well, but I’ll have to wait for the picture to be developed. I wish I could take my herbology notes to the class. All the notes next to the drawings would be a problem, though. Can’t risk exposing magic.”

From there their discussion meandered over to the Statute of Secrecy and what advantages and disadvantages this measure brought with it. When they finally went to bed, Harry seemed calmer. Hopefully he would be able to sleep now.

oooOOooo

Friday, 5th of July 1996
The mother of his heiress made a very good cake. It was a delight to eat and worked well with the tea that he had been offered. Xerxes was quite happy that he had agreed to Hermione’s idea of teaching her at her parents’ home. It gave him more safe immersion into current muggle culture. Or rather, the British variant of muggle culture. It hopefully would make speaking and interacting with the parents of the muggle-born students of his elementary school easier.

They currently were contacting a rather impressive number of new possible students, and some reactions had been rather strange. Luckily the number of magical children still in the foster care system had almost dropped to zero. Not that Xerxes gave in to any illusions over the number of children probably living in less-than-ideal conditions.

“I’m going to leave for the office,” Jean said from the door, jacket already put on, a smile on her face. “Do you need anything?”

“No, I think we have everything, Mum,” Hermione said with a smile, turning in her seat to look at her mother.

“I’ll be back late, darling. I hope you have a successful lesson.” And with that parting call she was gone.

“So let’s start on some political discussion. Did you have time to read some more of the files of Wizengamot sessions of the past?” There was a lot that Hermione still needed to learn that others of her station learned from the cradle up. She learned fast, and that worked in her favour, but it was still a lot to take in.

“Yes, I did,” Hermione answered, tucking a strand of her hair behind one ear. “And I have a lot of question on why flying carpets were actually banned on the British islands. What's written in the protocols as reasons given seem pretty useless to me.”

Xerxes smiled, she had such an analytical mind. “You’re right, the claims that the safety of the statute would be compromised were pushed forward into the public eye to cover up more mundane and financial reasons to ban them.” Xerxes eyed her and narrowed his eyes. “You’re upset about something not connected with shady practices in an attempt to protect the broom market in Britain. What is on your mind, Hermione?”

The girl gave a frustrated growl, that had Xerxes’ brows wing up in surprise. “Have you read the Prophet recently? That rag pretending to be a newspaper?” Xerxes just had to smile at her righteous fury, and her wild hand movements. “That horrid Skeeter has written a… an insulting article!” It seemed as if Hermione was having trouble finding the right words to express what she wanted to say.

“You’re referring to the article about the most eligible bachelor?” Xerxes put an amused spin on the last three words. He had been highly entertained while reading the article.

“Yes!” Hermione agreed with emphasis, spinning around from where she had started to pace. “It’s condescending! Implying that all women want is to marry someone rich, and that no one can be happy if they aren’t married! Where will she go next? Claim that Marcus and Harry aren’t safe or happy with Lord Slytherin? She would crush Harry if she did something like that!” Hermione stomped over to the nearest armchair and let herself fall into it with a huff. “She had no right!”

“I understand your frustration. But I fear that there’s little that can be done here. Miss Skeeter didn’t write anything wrong, everything is factually correct, and all speculations are easily recognizable as just that. I agree that she did exaggerate more than a little, but that is her usual style and the reason people love to read what she writes.” Xerxes knew only too well how people like
Rita Skeeter were. He had had his share of trouble just after Halloween 1981.

“It’s not right!” Hermione in that moment resembled more a toddler than a teenager.

“The public has a peculiar view on what they need to know. People of public interest are called that with good reason. Everyone who’s reasonably well known is a figure of public interest. Above all, those people are Quidditch players, the few musicians we have, members of rich families, members of the Wizengamot… I think you understand what I’m trying to say. As long as the press stays away from stalking someone, or character assassination, there isn’t much to be done, and I think you’ll have an easier time later, when you're Lady Lestrange in the Wizengamot, if you start to accept and work with it instead of fighting a losing battle.”

She growled low in her throat and Xerxes just knew that it would take a long time to convince Hermione Granger, Gryffindor, that there were things that couldn’t be fought.

“Dear, the human nature isn’t that easily changed, if it is possible at all. I may be old but I do remember how urgent everything is when one is a teenager.” In fact that urgency had helped Tom convince Xerxes to follow him. “I don’t think that you’ll be able to change the way Miss Skeeter and others write for those wanting to read just such drivel. But you might be able to work on other things. Like the still lingering prejudices. Don’t become a Don Quixote, my dear. Try to go for possible goals first, Hermione.”

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea how to work with oil paints, but it was fun writing the arts class! Do any of you have a favourite type of art?

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Next chapter planned for 13th of September 2019
Pretty Normal

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who shared their favoured type of art with me. There's a lot I like to watch, or listen to, and a few things I like to do myself. I want to start watercolour, and am working on drawing, some, but creating something tangible and useful is more mine than things to just look at.
And now have fun reading the new chapter I've crafted by weaving words into sentences.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, 6th of July 1996

“Do you have everything?” Marvolo asked his two sons for the tenth time that morning. At least it felt like the tenth time. He still wasn’t used to being that worried. Being a parent required a lot of adjustment. Even after weeks of being one. With Harry at school it had been easier, somehow.

“Yes, dad. We have everything.” Harry was rolling his eyes, but he was also smiling.

Before Marvolo could say more, Marcus started up a chant of “Let’s go! Let’s go!” and Marvolo decided to do exactly that.

He stepped towards the mantle of the fireplace and picked up the container with the floo powder to hold it out to Harry who was also holding his broom. “Harry you’ll go first, Marcus and I will be right behind you, so please don’t linger in front of the fireplace once you're through. And if you should end up somewhere else, just use your portkey and return home. Any more questions?”

Marvolo would feel better about sending his son through the floo on his own once he had a little more practice.

“No, Dad. I think I know what to do.” Harry took a pinch of the powder and stepped up towards the fireplace, loose linen robes flapping around his shins. He threw the powder down into the flames, tinting them green, stepped in and called out “Nott Manor” vanishing while he started to spin.

To give Harry a moment to arrive and step out of the way, Marvolo held out his hand to Marcus before he set the pot down back on the mantle. “Do you have any questions, Marcus?” He only got a head shake in answer, and felt his son’s grip on his hand tighten. “Then stay close and keep your elbows in.”

Moments later the two of them vanished in a flash of green light, spinning quickly in place, different fireplaces flashing by. Once they slowed down, Marvolo took a measured step out of the floo-network, supporting a stumbling Marcus and entering the blue and mermaid themed reception room in Nott Manor.

Harry was standing near to the fireplace, covered in soot and deep in conversation with the Nott Heir. “You look good without glasses! What did make you decide to go through with healing your
With a flick of his free hand Marvolo removed the soot from both Marcus and himself, before turning to Harry and drawing the teenagers attention by removing the soot from his older son.

“Lord Slytherin!” Theodore Nott startled visibly, before bowing a little deeper than was necessary, once he had turned to look to where Marvolo was standing.

“Heir Nott,” Marvolo greeted back, inclining his head and smirking at the flush of embarrassment on the teen’s cheeks. “I agreed to accompany Aiden to the birthday party, do you know where he is?”

“Father said they would be down here momentarily, Lord Slytherin.” It was painfully obvious how uncomfortable his son’s friend was, almost running away and fidgeting with his robe buttons.

“Don’t wait here on my account. I’m pretty sure you have other guests you need to tend to.” Harry had recounted the expected children just this morning over breakfast. “Have fun, and I expect you back for dinner, Harry.”

“Yes thing, Father,” Harry said with a smile, shouldering his broom. “Have fun at your party, Marcus. And tell your friend Happy Birthday from me.”

Marcus only nodded, keeping a look out for Aiden who also was invited to the birthday party.

It didn’t take long after both Theo and Harry had left for Benjamin and little Aiden to turn up, the boy dressed in shorts and a t-shirt – just like Marcus – a small knapsack on his back. “You’re already here. I’m sorry it took us so long, but Aiden insisted that we should wrap the present without magic, and neither one of us has a lot of experience with that.”

The image of Benjamin Nott and his son Aiden struggling with wrapping paper and spell-o-tape almost made Marvolo smile. But that probably would have scarred Benjamin – there hadn’t been much Marvolo had smiled about during the last war – so Marvolo did hide it.

“So everything is ready now?” Marvolo asked the small boy, holding his adopted father’s hand.

“Yes, sir. We wrapped the present in really nice paper. The butterflies move around!”

“That sounds pretty. If it’s alright with your father, I would suggest that we leave now. You both certainly don’t want to be late, do you?”

Earnest shakes of small heads was his answer, and Aiden walked over to hold Marvolo’s hand. “You’ll be picking them up later?” Marvolo directed his question to Benjamin. They had arranged everything beforehand, but it always was good to check.

“Just as we discussed, Marvolo.” There was a slight pause of hesitation before Benjamin used Marvolo’s chosen name, but one by one his Death Eaters got more comfortable with the changed dynamics. “And if there should be anything preventing me from picking our children up, I’ll send an elf to inform you and arrange a different way for them to get home.”

Marvolo planned on having Flimm keep an eye on Marcus the whole day – in fact he had ordered the elf to do so before going down to breakfast – so it wouldn’t be a problem anyway. But contingency plans were a good thing to have.

“Keep a good grip on my hands, you two, and take a deep breath and exhale when I give the signal.” Marvolo checked on both boys before calling up the image of the alley they were going to
He had checked the place out as soon as Marcus had been invited to the birthday party of one of the muggle-born girls in his son’s class.

“Now.” When the boys started to exhale Marvolo turned on the spot, drawing them in tight, concentrating on their destination, apparating to the nice village in the North of England.

Once they arrived it took a few moments – and a stomach-soother per boy – to mitigate the effects of apparation before they started to walk towards the house with its garden decorated with garlands, balloons, and lampions. The sound of playing children was a dead give-away as well.

Soon Marvolo had dropped off the two little wizards at a muggle house in a muggle neighbourhood. It was an odd situation. But the mother of the birthday girl had a friend over who was a witch, so the group of magical school children wasn’t without competent supervision.

Smiling to himself when he, without effort, thought that Harry would frown at that phrasing, and corrected that thought to clarify the competent to act in a magical emergency, Marvolo walked away back to the alley. He had a lot to do today, with the children out of the house for a longer time. Better get to it.

ooOoo

“You got rid off those ugly glasses!” was the first thing Draco said when Harry followed Theo out of the house and into the garden.

Harry laughed and shook his head. Trust Draco to make an almost Gryffindor-brash announcement like that while also being an obnoxious git about it. “How is life with a baby sister, Malfoy?”

Harry teased, setting his broom right next to the others against the wall of the house. “I guess your manor is big enough to get lost in, so she probably doesn’t wake you in the middle of the night crying because she’s hungry?”

“I’m lucky we’re rich. Her room is far enough from mine. And you know that there are silencing wards and charms that can be put on walls, right?” Draco was grinning from ear to ear, enjoying their bantering.

“Who else is here already?” Harry asked of Theo, who was standing right next to them, amused by their quips.

“Hermione is down by the herb garden, asked if she could look at what we have in there. She wants to write an essay about typical magical household gardens for herbology, or something.”

“Wait,” Harry interrupted his friend, “I thought we were to write an essay about one plant and its care?” Had he forgotten part of their homework?

“Yes. She said something about extra credit work?” Theo didn’t sound too sure, but it would fit with Hermione. She tended to go overboard with her efforts for school. there simply was no denying that. “Neville was also interested and went with her. Luna is somewhere over there.” Theo waved towards where Harry knew the owlery to be, “She said something about some Wrackspurts over there she wanted to shoo away?”

“I’ll go say hello to her then,” Harry decided, after all he hadn’t seen her since the train back to London, and he needed to talk with her about Emily and her insistent flirting that was getting on his
nerves. Talk of his girlfriend from school hadn’t worked as a deterrent like Harry had hoped.

“Sure. When a few of the others are here I would like to have a pickup Quidditch game before there will be cake and such later,” Theo said, nodding agreeably.

Not sure if and how to bring up Ginny, Harry simply nodded his agreement and made off towards the owlery in search of Luna. The whole situation with Theo and Ginny and their families was like a hornets’ nest. Not worth disturbing only for his curiosity's sake.

It didn’t take Harry long to find his girlfriend sitting on the grass near the owlery, an owl perched on her knee, letting itself being petted.

With a smile and nervous butterflies in his stomach Harry approached Luna, enchanted by the blonde strands of hair dancing in the almost non-existing wind. There always was something magical about her.

“Hi there!” he greeted once he was near enough, sitting down right next to her, folding his legs in tailor fashion.

“Harry! I missed you!” Luna moved closer to Harry, giving him first a quick peck on the lips, and then moving back in for a much longer kiss.

“I missed you too.” Hearing how breathless he sounded made Harry flush, but he also was really happy. He really had missed her.

“How is your art class? You did start one already, didn’t you?” In typical Luna fashion her attention was on the owl again, giving head scratches that seemed to be just in the right spot.

Not having her eyes on him made talking so much easier. “The class is great. The teacher, Phil, knows a lot and can explain really well. I have decided to paint a still life, herbs being prepared and dried, and have been trying different layouts all through class yesterday. And the other students are mostly nice too. I’m the youngest. But there’s this girl, Emily, she’s getting on my nerves.” Harry swallowed. Why did he tend to ramble when he was nervous?

“What did she do to be so irritating? Do you think she might have a problem with nargles?” Luna didn’t stop petting the owl, but Harry knew she was listening attentively even while seeming distracted.

“She’s always flirting with me. And doesn’t stop even though I said I have a girlfriend. It’s irritating,” Harry huffed, only barely happy with that explanation. The fact that her perfume and the clothes she had chosen to wear on Friday once again had gotten his body’s attention was bothering him a lot. But he had no idea how to talk about that. It was all so embarrassing.

“Is she pretty?” Luna asked, tilting her head as if she wanted to get a better angle for looking at the owl on her knee.

“Emily?” Luna managed time and again to react in surprising ways, so Harry was confused, and trying to decide what he or someone else would call pretty. “I guess? She does try to look good. Makeup and clothes and stuff.” What was Luna getting at? And was there even any reason to her question?

“Did you kiss?” The serene smile somehow made that question creepy. Why had Harry wanted to tell Luna about Emily again?

“No!? Why would I want to? I don’t even know her! And you’re my girlfriend! That would be…
simply wrong!” For a moment Harry longingly thought back to the days before Hogwarts. Life at the Dursleys' had been hard and boring, but predictable. This here was so confusing, terribly confusing.

“There’s nothing wrong with looking, Harry. Or with more if all agree,” Luna shrugged, still smiling. She looked up and tilted her head again like a curious puppy. “You’re cute, Harry. I’m not angry for something Emily is doing. Don’t worry so much. Are there Wrackspurts in the room you have your art class in?”

That made Harry laugh and lean close into Luna’s space, which led to them kissing, for quite some time.

ooOoo

“Where have you two been?” Hermione turned in her seat at the table on the porch – the lemonade was very good, not too sweet and refreshingly tart – as Draco called out to someone behind her.

When she spotted Harry and Luna, holding hands, walking towards them she smiled. It was so nice to see Harry so happy enjoying simple things.

“Why should we tell you?” Luna asked, sounding puzzled, before sitting down in Harry’s lap the moment he had settled down in one of the empty chairs.

“Are we going to play a game of quidditch now?” Harry asked, obviously in an attempt to change the topic. But that wouldn’t do. Or well, Hermione wanted to change the topic too, but to something serious, not that silly game.

“Have you read that horrible article that Skeeter woman published a few days ago?” Even after she had had time to think about the article – taking everything Uncle Xerxes had said into account – she still got angry every time she thought about it. She wanted to act, and acting without getting Harry’s input would not be right. He was affected. She shouldn’t act without his approval.

Harry rolled his eyes, which made Hermione bristle. Why couldn’t he take this seriously? “Yes, I’ve seen it. Father was not happy, but she didn’t lie. And I know you remember the terms of her agreement with you. She didn’t break it. We don’t gain anything if we get angry about it.”

“Harry!” Why was he always so contrary? “I don’t believe you! That article didn’t make you angry? Isn’t still making you angry? She may not be lying, but she speculates to a totally unreasonable degree. We can’t let her get away with that!”

“What agreement?” Theo injected a question from where he was sitting next to Draco, interrupting before Harry could react to Hermione’s question.

“Not really important, Theo.” Harry waved that question away, turning a suddenly serious look at Hermione. “You have seen those women’s magazines, those with gossip in them, like My Weekly. What Skeeter wrote isn’t that different from what’s written about celebrities anywhere in the world. And they tend to go even more overboard. Please, you don’t need to be offended on our behalf.”

In her frustration – why was Harry so dense about such things? – Hermione threw up her hands, barely refraining from grabbing her own hair which would ruin her hairdo. “But she’s projecting harmful prejudices and expectations from society through that rubbish! Don’t you see all the
damage she’s doing by writing this drivel?”

To Hermione’s confusion Harry pinched the bridge of his nose in a way reminiscent of Professor Snape before he took a deep breath, and opened his eyes. The moment he started to speak, Hermione felt her frustration grow at his tone. “You won’t change prejudices like those by putting pressure on one journalist. Not even in such a small community like ours. You know that people don’t like being told that what they do isn’t right. I can see it in your eyes, Hermione, you don’t like that I don’t seem to agree. Am I right?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. Then she huffed, closing her eyes. Harry was right, but it was so frustrating. “Excuse me for a while, please.” Hermione stood and left to ponder her approach to this problem. Before she was out of earshot she heard Theodore ask. “Seriously, Harry, what agreement?”

She picked up her pace and walked down to the nice bench that stood near the herb garden. The others probably would stay away from there, giving her the time she needed to calm down and come up with a plan.

A tentative one would be enough for a start.

ooooOoooo

One of the elves had informed Benjamin that there were two visitors waiting for him in the reception room, so Benjamin was on his way there to greet his visitors. Probably more of Theo’s friends from school. He had invited quite a few of them, and Benjamin was happy that his son’s circle of friends had grown over the past year.

When he reached the room he was surprised to see Arthur Weasley standing there with his sole daughter right beside him. The girl seemed to be vibrating with tension and anticipation, almost enough to float up from the ground. Benjamin wasn’t really sure if it was a good idea for the two of them to enter into a relationship, but as they were teenagers a certain amount of experimentation and impulsive decisions were expected.

Not that this knowledge of teenagers and their antics was helping him keep calm and act reasonable in this situation.

“Mr. Weasley, welcome to my home. Am I to assume that your daughter is here on Theodore’s invitation?” Reminding himself to be polite as Theo had claimed that he currently was interested in marrying Miss Weasley once they both had finished their education – as earnest as he had been, the possibility this would change was high – Benjamin smiled and waited for the other wizard to answer.

“That’s correct, Lord Nott. I’m here because my wife insisted I make sure that Ginny knows what is expected of her.” And Benjamin as the host, went unsaid. “And to agree on a time when I’ll be back to pick her up. She also wanted to make sure that Ginny isn’t alone with the boys.” Benjamin held back a smile when he saw Mr. Weasley roll his eyes.

“Hermione Granger and Luna Lovegood are here already. And the Greengrass sisters might arrive later. Theo told me the whole list of friends he invited, but to my shame I don’t remember them all.” Interesting to see that Mrs. Weasley insisted on following one of the oldest pure-blood
traditions, but only for her daughter as far as Benjamin could see. “You can come pick your daughter up before dinner.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Mr. Weasley said, nodding to his daughter, who bobbed a curtsey towards Benjamin before dashing off to the garden, or so Benjamin assumed.

“I’m sorry for her behaviour,” Mr. Weasley said, exasperated.

“No reason to be. Theo has been jittery the whole time since the children have been back from Hogwarts. I’m sure they have been waiting for this weekend. It must have felt like an eternity.” Benjamin knew how it had felt to not be able to see his love for an extended time. He still felt his loss from time to time, as if it had happened just days before, not years.

“Probably.” Mr. Weasley sighed. “I’ll be back to pick her up.”

“See you then,” Benjamin nodded, and waited until the flames went back to their normal red from the green tint floo powder caused, before turning on his heel and returning to his study. He probably would be interrupted again, but there were letters to read and answers to be written.

How long do we want to wait until we go play a round of Quidditch?” Draco asked after Hermione had stormed off and Harry had – once again – declined to explain what agreement he had alluded to. The lemonade was great, but sitting here and talking wasn’t why Draco had come. He wanted to fly and play.

“I guess until enough people are here?” Neville said, shrugging. “I will not touch a broom. And I think Hermione isn’t up to flying either. So that leaves, Harry and Luna, as well as you, Draco, and Theo… What, would you play two against two?”

“We could play one chaser and keeper against each other. Or two chasers without keeper. I want to play!” Draco knew he was whining but he really had looked forward to flying and didn’t want to wait any longer.

“We could.” Harry agreed, darting a look over to where Theo was playing with a small, thin piece of wood. “What do you think, Theo?”

“Hu?” Theo looked up, clearly not aware of what Harry had asked him.

“What do you think of playing two against two until the others are here? Do you know if Ginny and the others will be here soon?” Harry asked and Draco rolled his eyes. They could simply play, why were they talking?

“No idea when they’ll be here. But there’s a still a chance that she’ll be here.” Theo held up the small piece of wood he had been fiddling with. “I asked father to charm two pieces for me. I placed one into the letter for Ginny and asked her to snap it if her parents refuse to let her come.” He held up his piece. “Mine would snap as well. But it’s still whole.”

“So you want to wait and do nothing until your girlfriend’s here?” Draco moaned in annoyance. “Why are you romantic fools so pathetic?”
Harry had the audacity to laugh, but Draco's indignation quickly changed to dread when a
dangerous gleam started in those green eyes. “And when will you join the ranks of the lovesick
fools, Draco? I’m sure Pansy would be willing to help.”

Before Draco could come up with a good answer to that a person ran out of the house and jumped
Theo. The person had red hair and Draco was pretty sure that it had to be the Weasley girl.

“Good, let’s start playing!” Draco stood and clapped his hands together. If he didn’t force the
others to start already, it might never come to a game. “Okay! Harry and I against Theo and Ginny.
Or do you want to play, Luna?”

“No, that’s fine. I like watching more than playing.” She didn’t even look at him. That girl was
strange, but she was Harry’s girlfriend not his, so why should he complain?

“And we can switch after a while.” Ginny agreed, her cheeks flushed. “Can I borrow a broom? I
didn’t bring one.”

“You can have one of mine. Let’s move over to the pitch.” It wasn’t really a pitch like they had at
their manor, or like the one at Potter Manor, more a big stretch of relatively flat grass. But it was
enough for a pick-up game with a few friends.

Laughing and talking animatedly, everyone – with the exception of Granger who was still sulking –
walked over to the pitch a few moments later. Maybe this would get to be a great afternoon.

And maybe Draco would manage to find out what exactly that agreement was between Skeeter and
Granger. Probably had something to do with the articles during the tournament fiasco, and possibly
something with the beetle like qualities that witch had.

Not really caring one way or the other – he was just curious – Draco claimed the spot of chaser on
his team and swooped up into the air on his broom, hair blowing in the wind, calling out a whoop
of joy.

It was afternoon when Bill apparated over to Griffin House where Marvolo had suggested they
meet for the start of preparations and planning.

While everything before had been exhilarating and out of what was normal, even for a curse-
breaker, removing the portion of a soul from a living being was so much more daunting. That the
living being in this case was human, and a child, and someone Bill knew and actually liked, made
the whole situation so much worse.

The door was opened by an elf Bill hadn’t seen before, bowing as seemed to be custom, and
walking quickly to stay ahead of Bill while leading him to the study Marvolo normally used. The
first thing Bill noticed the moment he stepped into the study was the desk covered in papers,
letters, and books. Once he had settled down in one of the visitor chairs, it became clear that
nothing of what was covering the desk had to do with the ritual they had worked on, or horcruxes.
It looked more like books about laws and estate management, as well as a lot of letters of normal
conversation, invitations, business proposals and the like.

“Who’s that elf? Have I seen it before?” Bill really wasn’t sure, he didn’t pay that much attention
to house elves when he came into contact with them, which didn’t happen all that often usually.

“His name is Henbane, he’s my personal elf, and I have no idea if you have met before,” Marvolo said, writing some last word with a flourish onto one piece of parchment before looking up. “Hi, Bill. Thanks for coming.”

“You know that I want to help. Why shouldn’t I come when you ask me for help?” Bill shrugged. “What exactly do you need my help for now? I’m not an expert in laws or any of that high-society… stuff.” Bill waved at the mess on the desk, tilting his head in question. “There isn’t even a date coming up that I think would be especially beneficial for this ritual.” Bill felt reluctant to really speak out loud what they would have to do, hopefully to remove something from Harry that had no place to be stuck in him.

“We have a blue moon this month, Bill. We decided that a day of power is too dangerous, because it’s too powerful, but any normal day could be too weak. A second full moon in a month is not a situation that happens all that often, but it isn’t rare either. I know that means we’ll be rather short of time to prepare everything we need. But I’m not comfortable leaving the horcrux where it is, longer than necessary. And with Harry being at school most of the year, opportunities are rare as it is.” Marvolo sighed and waved a hand, neatening up the random stacks into something resembling a planned mess rather than a haphazard one.

“A blue moon… yes, that could work. When is it? The 30\textsuperscript{th}, right? That leaves us with more than three weeks for preparation. I think that’s enough. We’ve come to a place where we can replicate the ritual adequately, but we might want to adapt some of the surrounding parameters.”

Bill made a face, that sounded much too stuck-up and clinical. He rubbed a hand over his face, taking a deep breath.

“Like what?” Marvolo didn’t sound his best, leaning back in his chair.

“Another healer on scene, so there is one for you and one for Harry, for starters,” Bill said without a moment’s hesitation. “I think using the Malfoys’ ritual room is a good idea, after it's been cleaned once more. It’s very well made.” Then Bill fell quiet when things came to mind that needed sorting but were kind of gruesome to contemplate.

“I also should prepare for the eventuality that the ritual goes wrong… don’t you think?”

Unhappy that his fear had been said out loud, Bill gave Marvolo a dark look. “If you fear something might go wrong now, you should have feared something going wrong before now while you did the same ritual in experimental form several times, Marvolo.”

Now it was Marvolo who shrugged. “Maybe because I was missing several pieces of my soul when I started out experimenting? This is the last piece, and it’s really small. Maybe I’m back to being almost normal? The fact I’m now also responsible for two children, one of them still really young, might have changed my perception of things.”

Bill inclined his head, conceding the point.

“So, updating your Will?” Bill winced, that sounded so bad. “Or maybe finding a different way? One that isn’t risking your life? We could include a few more rune sequences into the circle to protect you.” That idea had merit and set Bill’s mind on a merry chase for possible ways to do that and not risk the integrity of the circle.

“Sounds like a reasonable precaution. As well as the second healer. I'll have to see who might be
available and able, as well as willing, to help. Any suggestions?” Marvolo pulled out an empty sheet of parchment and picked his quill back up, starting on what looked like a list of tasks.

“What about the healer that works at St. Mungo's as an expert on the consequences of dark magic? I know he’s really good, he helped quite a few curse-breakers I know. And didn’t he work with Dumbledore after he was subjected to that unique curse last year?” Bill offered as an option.

“Do you think he can be trusted? I’m pretty sure what we plan to do isn’t actually legal, even as I’m also pretty confident that it’s not exactly illegal either. I would rather not ruin the lives of my sons and myself, because I involve someone new at this stage.” Bill narrowed his eyes, there was the slightest glimmer in Marvolo’s eyes that indicated some hidden amusement. They had spent a lot of time together.

“Yes,” Bill answered slowly, while trying to puzzle out what was amusing Marvolo so much, “he’s proven himself trustworthy.”

“That’s good.” Marvolo was smirking now, and when Bill growled in frustration, he had the audacity to chuckle. “Let it rest, Bill. I’m pretty sure you don’t want to know.” Bill gave an exasperated sigh, but let it go. Marvolo had a past – a dangerous, dark, murderous past – and Bill really didn’t want to know too many details.

“So two healers, a freshly cleaned ritual room, a reworked Will… what else needs to be done?” Bill tried to steer the conversation back on topic.

“I need to find someone to look after Marcus for a few days. I think both Harry and I will probably need to rest after we are finished. Maybe I’ll ask Benjamin if Marcus can have a sleepover with Aiden.” The quill moved over the parchment, adding another item to the list.

“Do you intend to inform Madame Bones that there might be a risk of her…” Bill couldn’t speak it, maybe it was superstition but talking about the things that needed to be done if a ritual went wrong wasn’t something done by those taking part in the preparation. It simply was bad luck and therefore not done.

“I’m not sure… maybe in general terms? That I intend to reverse something that is still a danger, and that I don’t want to involve anyone not needed in it. I also would ask you to read my first draft of a book. I need some feedback on presentation of the information, and if it is not too biased. I want it to be a deterrent by providing all the information I didn’t have. But I’m not unbiased, and I know you have enough knowledge to adequately judge the content, and are also stable and grounded enough not to be tempted.”

It took a moment for Bill to notice that Marvolo was holding a stack of loosely bound parchment pieces into his direction. When he had taken in the mixed compliment, Bill took the draft from Marvolo and looked at the first page, which showed only name of the author and title – annotated with working draft – and Tom Marvolo Riddle, Lord Marvolo Slytherin, also known as Lord Voldemort was noted as the author. “That’s thorough,” was all Bill could say, still too shocked to say anything else.

“I wanted to provide some context. There’s also a rather personal introduction. The order might seem counter intuitive, but I plan to charm it so that a reader can’t skip forward without reading every single page. So all deterents and all the important information of the adverse effects can’t be skipped before one reaches the information on how to create horcruxes.” Marvolo seemed oddly calm about the whole thing while Bill was wondering what his mother would say if she saw him reading something like that.
“You can write in the margins, mark words, whatever you need to make your point. This is an extra copy. I charmed it to be unreadable for anyone who didn’t receive it directly from my hand. I don’t want to get you into trouble.”

“Thanks,” was all that could be said to that. “Do you want to make a plan for preparations, like practising the whole ritual and its steps?” Bill really felt they would feel better about the whole situation if they were sure about the steps and secure in the knowledge that they had done everything they could in preparation.

“Let’s do that,” Marvolo agreed, picking up another piece of parchment to draw up a schedule.

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**Wednesday, 10th of July**

A summer storm was raging outside the cabin Charlie lived in, and Ron folded the letter Harry had sent with Hedwig several days ago, back into its original shape. It had been a long letter, expressing happiness over Ron’s sudden luck in being able to visit his brother, talking at length over Hermione’s newest obsession with Rita Skeeter and her tendency to exaggerate, and behind it all hope that they would have time to play quidditch together once Ron was back in England.

He felt bad about uprooting the plans they had made on the train, and about not writing sooner. So he got out Charlie's inkwell and one of the quills – it looked like it had been burned at the edges – and started on a letter to his friend.

**Hi Harry,**

*Sor*ry*ry for taking so long. It’s so exciting here! Charlie hasn’t let me too close to the dragons. Not as close as you were when you tried to get that egg. But still closer than sitting in those stands let me be. And they are huge! I have to tell you it’s great that dad convinced mum to let me go. You know her. She didn’t think it would be a good idea for me to be here.

I like the people here. They’re so laid-back and easygoing. Not such stuck-up pricks like the people Percy works with. It’s funny how almost all of them wear their hair short, or even shaved. Even the witches! I guess the danger of setting it on fire when near the dragons, or their eggs, makes that the better choice. A few have long hair but braided really close to the head. It looks kind of neat. Do you think it would look good on me? But I would have to have my hair grow out… a potion would work. I wonder why Snape has long hair while always working around flames and fumes. And not even tied back. Can you imagine Hermione with her hair really short?

If I’m lucky I can stay another two weeks. Currently the weather is terrible, a storm with thunder and heavy rain is forcing us to stay inside. Even the dragons have hunkered down to ride the weather out. But the cabin is great. There are bunk-beds and a small fireplace made from stones you can find all around here. The rain blows against the windows. I think they would break if there wasn’t a charm on them to prevent that.
Next week a clutch of abandoned eggs are expected to be hatching. First I wasn’t sure if I wanted to come close to those mini beasts. You remember Norbert? Baby dragons are still dragons, way too many sharp teeth for my liking. But the dragon handlers here do know what they’re doing. More than Hagrid did. For one thing, they only build their cabins out of stone and specially treated wood that's covered with stone on the outside. Nothing can burn here.

No, that’s not completely correct, almost all the trees are heavily burned. I guess that’s what happens when there are grown dragons around.

This place is so big that we need to use brooms to get from one point to the other. I think I could do something like that if I don’t manage to get onto a Quidditch Team. Do you think there will be scouts from the teams at our games next year? It would be absolutely great to have that opportunity! Think you’ll play again? Maybe against Hufflepuff? I think as long as you don’t play seeker against us I think you should absolutely play!

Charlie has dinner finished, so I’ll wrap up. Will have to wait for better weather before I can send this letter. Hope your holidays are as much fun as mine!

See you!

Ron

Leaving the letter out so the ink hopefully would dry, Ron went over to eat the scrambled eggs with sausages Charlie had made. He was ravenous!

Wednesday, 17th of July 1996

It had been one of those long and boring sessions, tedious beyond belief. Marvolo was happy that it was over, and judging by the way Harry rolled his shoulders as they both stood from the Slytherin seat – Harry had opted to sit with Marvolo and let the man explain instead of sitting in the Potter seat and writing a report later – and made their way over to the almost obligatory mingling after the session.

“Can I go over and talk a while with Neville?” Harry asked from just next to Marvolo’s elbow, all manners and respect. He had learned a lot since Marvolo had adopted Harry.

“Of course. Don’t leave the vicinity. Be prepared to leave soon. I don’t think we’ll stay much longer.” Marvolo gave his permission, smiling, and his glamoured eyes – would the last ritual return them from red to the colour they had been before? – searching the room for Amelia. He wanted to speak with her.

“Thanks, Dad.” Harry whispered while already starting to make his way over to where his friend was standing next to his grandmother.
Moments later Marvolo spotted Amelia in a conversation with Cornelius and a few other department heads. Nodding to a few of the others as he walked past, Marvolo made his way over, catching her eyes with his request for a talk.

When she nodded almost imperceptibly, Marvolo changed his course subtly to walk over to a more secluded spot. This time he would erect some privacy charms. Even though he didn’t plan to make too-obvious statements where others might see or hear.

“You looked bored out of your mind there. If not for your son sitting next to you I’m almost sure you would have dozed off like Lord Ogden,” Amelia said the moment she had made her way over to where Marvolo was waiting.

Marvolo chuckled, adding a charm for a backrest was a nice idea, before shaking his head. “Well, it certainly wasn’t the most exciting one.”

“What do you want to talk about? You certainly wouldn’t go to all that trouble,” Amelia waved her hand around, clearly indicating the privacy charms Marvolo had raised, “if you wanted to organise a time for Marcus and I to meet.”

“True. I wanted to inform you that I’m going to adjust my Will to see to it that you will be the one holding Marcus’ inheritance in trust for him until he comes of age should something happen to me.” In fact Marvolo already had finished those parts of the preparations for the final horcrux retrieval ritual. “Dowager Longbottom will do the same for Harry.”

“Why the sudden concern over something happening to you, Marvolo? You’re not really old. And while you might have a rather large number of possible enemies, you also are one of the most accomplished duellers currently alive. You can protect yourself.” Her eyes narrowed. “Do you plan something foolish?”

Marvolo gave her his best “who-me?” look, before he answered. “There’s still some stuff around I need to take care of. And no, I can’t let more people in to make it safer. And yes, I’ll let you know once I have finished with what I need to do, and if you can provide help.”

Amelia huffed and rolled her eyes. “I’ve got a feeling that I don’t really want to know more. So the only thing left to do is for me to wish you luck. Be careful and get as much help as you can. Promise me that. Marcus and Harry need you.” She placed her hand on his arm, emphasising her point.

Marvolo placed one of his own hands on top of hers and squeezed before letting his arm fall to his side. “I promise.”

They parted ways without exchanging further words, knowing that it would be pointless in this moment.

Marvolo collected his son, only greeting Dowager Longbottom and the Longbottom Heir briefly, before walking out and making their way to the foyer where they planned to use the floo to get home.

Harry needed more practice with that method of travel.

“Lord Slytherin! A moment of your time, please!”

Taking a deep breath, Marvolo braced himself for the assault of questions he expected from Rita Skeeter. He had trained for this with Lucius’ help. He would get through this with dignity and without losing her goodwill.
“Keep calm and let me answer her questions, Harry,” Marvolo said before raising his occlumency shields to full power and turning to face the ruthless reporter Rita Skeeter to answer questions. Calmly and with dignity.

Chapter End Notes

kind of a cliffhanger :D
Some of you probably have already noticed that I'm wrapping this story up. We're coming close to the end I had planned from the beginning. If everything goes like I have planned there will be another chapter and an epilogue after this one. I know that there are a lot of plot lines I could work with further, but the main one, the relationship between Marvolo and Harry, comes to a close. I don't want to go on rambling with this story just because there is more to explore in the world I have created here. Maybe I'll come back for some of the other story seeds later. One never knows.

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

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Wednesday, 17th July 1996

“I do have a few moments, Miss Skeeter,” Marvolo said with a smile that was devoid of warmth but all professionalism.

“Thank you,” she said with a smile bright as a lumos, but all professionalism as well. While she readied her notepad and quill, Marvolo noticed how Ministry employees and attendees of the Wizengamot meeting stopped around them. Some of them were less than subtle in the way they stopped just inside hearing range.

“Do you plan to marry anytime soon? Are the single witches going to lose the most eligible bachelor before they can make a pass themselves?” Skeeter resembled a shark having sensed blood in the water.

“I don’t plan to marry. And there have been several people making passes so far,” Marvolo answered, remembering the many flirting people on all the functions around Yule.

“You don’t plan to marry? Why ever not? You’re young yet and have two sons who certainly would benefit from a female presence in their lives!” The nods all around made clear that most of the people watching agreed with that assessment. Sometimes society was tiring.

“Henry is at Hogwarts most of the year, where he has regular contact with Professors, including witches. I do employ a nanny for Marcus, who also has several female teachers at his school. There’s no reason to marry simply to give my sons a female presence in their lives.” Really, that was one of the dumbest reasons to marry Marvolo could imagine.

“And what about your own needs? Staying single isn’t the most happy a wizard can be!” Skeeter seemed pretty convinced that she was telling the truth, and Marvolo could understand better now why Amelia had decided to simply let the assumption stand that she was still mourning her family, devoting herself to magical law and her niece.

“I’m not alone, Miss Skeeter. I’ve got friends and family. And before you claim that no wizard can be happy without a wife or other companion, I want to ask you if you would ask a widower the same questions?” Marvolo was pretty sure he was asexual. The human form simply held nothing of interest for him. Madame Goyle had given him literature on other forms of sexual attraction – interesting to read, but nothing felt really relevant to him – and it seemed there were a lot of layers to this aspect of human life and a chance for him to find a romantic interest. Not that he was sure that he wanted to fall in love, or that he didn’t want to fall in love.
Skeeter seemed to flounder for a moment, and Marvolo took the chance, smiled, kinder this time – at least he was going for kind – trying to end this impromptu interview right there. “I stumbled unprepared into that curse, Miss Skeeter, I don’t want to repeat the error of running headfirst into something unknown. I’m Lord Slytherin, not Gryffindor.” That last line brought about a lot of laughter and a break in tension that made it possible for him to sketch a bow, turn, place an arm around Harry’s shoulders, and start to walk away.

“Was that a joke?” Harry asked in an almost whisper.

“I’m sure Lucius feels smug about the fact it worked so well. It was his idea.” In fact there had been quite a few jokes Lucius had insisted they prepare. Marvolo had practiced them again and again until they seemed natural and spontaneous once again.

Harry chuckled. “We need to hurry, or I’ll be late to my class.”

Nodding, Marvolo agreed, taking a pinch of floo powder. “I’ll apparate you into the area. It’s quicker than waiting for the driver. You’ll be in time.”

oooOoooo

Sunday, 21st of July 1996

It was a sunny day, and Draco was really happy that he had gotten his dream birthday party. As his birthday had been when they all had taken their OWL exams, no one had been in the mood to have a party. That had swayed his parents to allow a party with only his friends, and games and nice food, without all the adults and their politics.

It was great!

Walking over to the buffet to secure himself another slice of the excellent chocolate cake, Draco noticed Harry just standing there, holding a glass of reddish lemonade, smiling a little wistfully. Or sadly? Draco wasn’t sure, but would find out. “Who are you hiding from? The little ones aren’t here to demand you play dragon.” That story had been told up and down in school after that party. And one benefit of only having his own friends here was that the small children weren’t here as they tended to be at summer parties.

Harry sighed, tipping the scales in favour of his being sad. “I know. But the girls are after me, demanding to help me get a total makeover. Something about when I get rid of my glasses I should also do something about my hair. I didn’t wait around to hear what else they might want to do. Astoria is a force to reckon with!”

Draco shared in the chuckle over that.

But hiding from the girls and a makeover plan didn’t explain the odd look on Harry’s face. For a brief moment Draco’s curiosity warred with his common sense and training of how an heir and Slytherin should act. Then he decided to change the topic.

“When do you plan to have your own birthday party? On your actual birthday? I guess you can’t get your little brother out of the picture? I guess that’s not really an option, is it?” Why was he
And Harry gave another sigh – that was getting irritating – before he shrugged, took a sip from the lemonade and answered. “No. To both. Marcus wants to be there, and I want to have him there. It’s nice having a little brother. I guess that might change later;” he shrugged again, “but at the moment it’s still new enough to be nice. And I won’t have a party on my actual birthday. Maybe the weekend after. Something small. We’ll see.”

Deciding that enough was enough, Draco plucked the lemonade glass out of Harry’s hands, placed it on the table, right next to the bowl of candied fruits to go with the ice cream, and started to pull his friend over to where Theo and Blaise were talking with Greg and Vincent.

“Let’s go and play a game of Quidditch. This morose mood can’t stay this way. You don’t want to ruin my birthday party, do you?”

Following along with a laugh, Harry reclaimed his hand, and walked faster once they reached the others. “No, we don’t want to make little Draco cranky. So let’s play Quidditch!”

“Hey!” Draco exclaimed, indignant, running to catch up with Harry, while the others started to laugh and followed as well. This was better. And he was going to win!

Wednesday, 29th of July 1996

“Harry! Is something wrong? Why did you call? Everything all right? It’s the middle of the night over in London, isn’t it? Tell me that you’re all right, please!” Harry was so happy to see his godfather’s face and was endlessly amused by the man’s antics.

“I can’t tell you anything if you don’t stop to let me speak!” It had been the right decision to call Sirius. He already felt better, tension leaving his muscles, which had kept him from sleeping for hours now.

“I’m sorry, you’re right. Please, go ahead,” Sirius answered, nodding a bit too rapidly to be convincing.

Harry felt himself smile, legs stretching out more comfortably under his light summer blanket. “I couldn’t sleep. Tomorrow is a full moon, the second this month.”

“A blue moon, I know. I’ve been keeping track ever since I learned of Remus’ furry little problem. Why is that relevant?” Sirius certainly wasn’t a patient man.

“I’m coming to that. Can you please stop interrupting me?” And still Harry felt oddly comforted by Sirius simply being Sirius. His godfather mimed spelling his lips shut – and had that gesture taken Harry some time to understand – and Harry took a deep breath before explaining what had him up at this ungodly hour. “I’m sure you remember what Dumbledore told the Order about me? The connection and my scar?” Harry really didn’t want to go into detail and use the words to describe more. Sirius should know what he was talking about. And judging by the suddenly paler face, he did remember. “Marvolo has worked hard to create a way to get it out without harming me. And
we agreed to do it now and not wait longer. The night of the blue moon seemed like a good choice. Don’t want to risk one of the more powerful days, and I’m going to be at Hogwarts for most of those anyway, but a normal day might not be ideal either, so, yes, tomorrow.” Harry shrugged suddenly feeling awkward. Rambling was a bad habit of his he wasn’t fond of.

The sound of Sirius taking a deep breath made Harry focus back on the mirror in his hand. “Are there risks?” He sounded oddly controlled.

“Not for me, Bill is pretty sure. The circle contains a lot of rune sequences aiming to protect me. I’m not sure I like that there aren’t as many protecting Marvolo as there are for Bill and me. Marcus would be really… I don’t even know. I think it would break him to lose his new father so soon after gaining a family.” Harry really didn’t want to think about how his life would change should Marvolo die with the reintegration of the very last horcrux.

“Bill is working on this? I’m sure he made sure that all is set up correctly. And I have to say that it makes me feel better to know that you’ll be safer after this is done. There are still people around knowing about that, and who might take exception to him.” Sirius took another deep breath, calming down further. “Shouldn’t you be sleeping? Resting to be prepared for the ritual?”

Harry nodded. He really should be. “I simply couldn’t sleep. I’ve been tossing and turning all night so far. Calling you came to mind. Decided you needed to know.” Harry nodded into the mirror. His thought process hadn’t been that coherent, but it had been a good decision nonetheless. His godfather needed to know that he would be in potential danger pretty soon.

“Do you feel like you could sleep now?” Sirius asked, his grey eyes looking soft in his tanned face.

“Not really. How’s your summer? How are Enora and Nawel?” They hadn’t really talked since Sirius had travelled to stay the summer with his daughters. The time difference had made it difficult. Harry had really missed their talks.

“It’s going quite well. The weather is nice, and the locals don’t seem to be as untrusting as they were at the start…” Sirius rambled on and on, slowly talking Harry into a sleepy state. After they had said their farewells, it didn’t take long for Harry to drift off into sleep.

oooOOooo

Tuesday, 30th of July 1996

Draco watched as his father almost let himself fall into the armchair he favoured in their family parlour. He hadn’t seen his father this unsettled often. His hair was even in disarray!

“They’re now settled in the ritual room, and preparations have started. We shouldn’t go in there until Mr. Weasley or one of the healers comes to inform us that the ritual has concluded.” He raised one hand and used it to move his hair out of his eyes, ruining his careful styling it even more.

“There’s no need to worry so much, love,” Draco’s mother interjected from where she was playing with Cassiopeia, who was resting on her lap. “It’s not the first ritual our Lord has conducted here, and you know as well as I that he’s more than competent.”
I’m not worried because I doubt our Lord’s competence, but because he has two healers and a curse-breaker here to help, and his son will be involved too. The boy was changing into a linen shirt when I left!” That would explain why his father was so stressed. Harry would be taking part in a ritual? One that required two healers to be present?

“What ritual are they going to perform?” Draco asked before he could think better of it.

“I don’t know, Draco. But there aren’t any rituals that would require the attendance of two healers. The last few I witnessed the aftermath of… I’m worried.” He bent forward, resting his elbows on the armrests, and his face in his hands.

While his mother started to talk in soothing tones, obviously trying to reassure her husband, Draco’s mind raced. Harry had known of this ritual back when he had been at Draco’s birthday party, and it was the reason that there would be no birthday party for Harry tomorrow. What were they doing? What kind of ritual was so important that it needed to be done so urgently that a birthday took a less important place? And what important ritual didn’t get performed on one of the days of power?

Now he was worried as well. Maybe he should distract himself. “Am I allowed to visit Theo?”

“Sure, darling. Please ask if he has time before you floo over, and be back for dinner,” his mother answered, looking over with a smile.

“Thank you, mother.” Theo probably was worried as well. Maybe spending time together would make the waiting easier. Draco almost ran to the floo once he was out in the hall.

ooOoo

Malcolm wasn’t sure how to feel. His Lord’s heir was sitting in one corner of the ritual room at Malfoy Manor, meditating in preparation for a ritual that he had witnessed before. That was a clear sign that the boy was to take part in the ritual. That Jugson was here as well was another sign. But Malcolm wasn’t sure why the boy was participating in the place where objects had been before, and that was anything but reassuring.

“Hey! Have the fairies got to you? Greengrass, I’m talking to you.” Feeling himself blush, Malcolm concentrated on their discussion once more. How mortifying to be this distracted, and to be caught being distracted.

“I’m sorry.” Malcolm took a deep breath and banned his worry for one of his charges – the Dark Lord was powerful in a way that made worrying for him feel redundant – and continued with his rundown of the boy’s health. “He finished a course of long-term healing potions and nutrition potions just before the school year ended. We had to mend several badly healed bones last summer. I’ve been monitoring him for possible effects of the Imperius, the Cruciatues, and the Killing Curse. Not that there seem to be any negative effects.” He shrugged, still mystified by the odd fact that there was nothing his scans had shown.

Throwing a short look over his shoulder to see what the Dark Lord and the red-headed curse-breaker were doing, Malcolm huffed a frustrated breath. “I don’t know what this is about, exactly, and therefore don’t know why exactly you’re here, Jugson, but I guess it’s good to have two healers on site when two people are involved in a ritual this complex.”
Jugson looked contemplative and nodded. “I think it would be good to have someone there for Weasley as well, but I guess we’ll have to do.” Malcolm had the feeling that Jugson was more in the know than he himself. How frustrating, but kind of logical. Jugson was the expert on the long-term and short-term effects of Dark Magic. He was the expert here, while Malcolm was the family healer and therefore the expert for the general health of both Lord Slytherin and his heir.

“So we agree on the division of labour?” Jugson asked. “You concentrate on our Lord, and I take care of his son as soon as Mr. Weasley gives us the all-clear?”

“We’ve gone over the plan at least three times now, Jugson. I already agreed to this plan, because our Lord insists that you take care of his son. You know that you’re not helping my nerves with your insistence on going over the plan this many times.” Malcolm gave Jugson a withering glare.

“Sorry for being nervous and for only knowing about this roughly half a month. I didn’t want to believe this for the first week. Have been researching since then. You know this is highly experimental, right?” The sarcasm was laid on thick, and Malcolm could do nothing but shrug.

Really, what could he say? “I assume you can’t tell me more that would help me with my work?”

Jugson just shook his head. “You know what to do, Greengrass. You’ve cared for our Lord more than once after one of these rituals. The addition of our Lord’s heir shouldn’t change anything for you.”

Malcolm huffed again, but nodded. He picked up his case of potion phials – prepared by Snape – and walked over to the part of the room nearest to where his Lord was going to sit inside the circle. It did take longer than if he could have taken a straight path, but he needed to avoid the part of the floor where the circle was being drawn by the two other wizards in the room.

Once he reached his designated corner, he started to arrange the potions in the way he always did when he had time to prepare. It was a comfort to know that long practice would help him to pick up the right potions even under stress when he placed them just right.

Jugson was doing the same on the other side of the room and the two men crawling around on the floor.

ooOoo

Deep in concentration, Bill worked on his assigned part of the ritual circle. The chalk moved fluidly over the smooth floor. This ritual room was on par with those that he had used at Gringotts, much better than any they had had set up in Egypt, or any he had seen in any other private home. Not that he had seen very many of those. If someone had no extra money, an empty room was not something people tended to keep around.

With all the times Marvolo and he had drawn this exact same rune configuration in preparation for this day, doing it now was slowly leading him into a meditative state. Despite all that rested on this ritual’s working as they had designed it, Bill’s pulse slowed, his breathing deepened, and he relaxed.

Glass was making almost imperceptible noises from the places where the healers were setting up their places. Harry shifted where he was meditating, adding fabric shifting against itself to the cacophony of soft sounds. Chalk on slate, glass against glass, fabric against the floor and itself, the
breathing of them all.

There were also the smells. Clean linen, the beeswax from the candles, the potion-soaked chalk, the variety of dried herbs in their bowls, mixed with the scent of human sweat. And not a bit of soap or cologne. Even the two healers, who weren’t involved directly in the ritual, had cleaned themselves and had changed into simply linen shirts just like the rest of them. They would probably look silly if someone were watching from outside.

Adding a last curl to one of the runes, Bill stood and carefully moved out of the circle to start inspecting their work. Marvolo's and his own. Nodding to himself, Bill came to the conclusion that this circle was perfect. Now he needed to make sure that he didn’t mess up the chants.

ooOoo

Marvolo was nervous.

Very nervous.

More nervous then when he had been sitting under the Sorting Hat as an eleven-year-old boy. Or when he had done his very first ritual. After that he had lost his fear and nerves. Maybe it had been teenage arrogance, maybe it had been the fact that he had started to cut up his soul.

Marvolo didn’t know, and he didn’t care.

He was nervous now.

He had prepared as best he could, had gotten competent help – something he had never really done before this quest to patch his soul back up – and he had been working on regret.

It seemed to have helped with the cup. It couldn’t do any harm now.

It was a logical conundrum to feel regret for something that had made his current living situation possible. If he hadn’t killed Harry’s parents, he would never have adopted the boy, or Marcus. Maybe he never would have regained a large part of his soul, staying insane. It was also quite possible that he would have won, and destroyed everything.

In fact, that problem had kept Marvolo up at night, until he had decided to talk with Mrs. Goyle about it. He was happy with the way his life was now. Was it possible to feel regret for what had happened to make that possible?

She had helped him understand that it was possible, even quite normal, to feel contradictory things at the same time, and even about the same situation.

And feeling the way he did, Marvolo had to concede that she was right.

“Everything is prepared.” Bill said, drawing the attention of all the adult wizards, and not Harry’s who seemed deep in meditation.

“And it’s almost time,” Healer Jugson said, before shutting his mouth, his teeth clicking against each other.

Not willing to concentrate on impertinent subordinates, Marvolo just nodded and moved to touch
Harry’s shoulder, rousing him from his calm, meditative state

“Huh?” Harry blinked sleepily, shaking his head a little, before his green eyes focused on Marvolo. “Everything ready?”

“Yes, only we two are missing from the picture,” Marvolo said in a poor attempt at humour. “Do you need a hand up?”

Harry started to shake his head, but when he fell back onto his behind on his first attempt to stand, he changed the motion to a nod. “Yes, please. I think my legs have fallen asleep. How long will this take? Sitting on this floor is cold and not all that comfortable. I’m not sure how much longer I can do it.” Without much effort – Harry still was pretty lanky – Marvolo pulled Harry to stand, then let go of the boy’s hand. Harry shook out his legs, and used his shirt to dry his sweaty palms.

“Not too long, I would hope.” Marvolo tried to sound reassuring, but he was pretty sure that his attempt fell flat.

Harry gave a wavering smile, and on a whim Marvolo embraced his son.

How he wished that he had ceded to Severus’ request that night. A stunner was a pretty easy spell to cast, not hard at all, and so effective. It was not important that if he had done that, Harry probably would be dead right now. But with that Killing Curse he had killed another descendant of Slytherin. She had been family, and he hadn’t learned of that fact until much too late.

Harry’s arms snaked around Marvolo’s torso, returning the hug that Marvolo really didn’t want to break.

He was glad that he had Harry as his son, but because of what he had done, Harry had had to grow up without a mother, just as Marvolo had. So many missed opportunities. He should have done something else, anything else.

.:I’m so very sorry:. Marvolo whispered into his son’s unruly dark hair, tightening the embrace, and wishing he could change the past, change what he had done.

.:I know:. Harry whispered back.

Suddenly there was a red glow very near Marvolo’s face, where the scar had been on Harry’s forehead since the night Marvolo – no, Voldemort – had tried to kill him as a baby. The glow got brighter and brighter, and a deep burning pain spread through Marvolo’s chest before there was a sudden burst of dust-like substance in red around both Harry and Marvolo, enveloping them before surging into Marvolo’s mouth, which he had opened as he gasped in pain.

There was no panic, even as Marvolo knew he should feel panic. This wasn’t what was supposed to happen. Not at all.

Suddenly all pain was gone, as well as the feeling in his arms and legs. While falling to the floor, Marvolo wondered what exactly had happened here, and how long they would have to delay the ritual.

Before he lost consciousness, he saw Malcolm and Jeremy bending over him and Harry, looking worried, casting what looked like diagnostics. Then everything went dark...
“Dad said that he and Harry need to rest today, sleep a lot, so I get to stay with you, Aiden.” Marcus was rambling on and on to his little friend while Severus was setting up the stations and tools they would need today.

He had been working on another version of the paper for the family connection potion they had been working on intermittently, when his Lord’s call had reached him. It had been shocking to be led to the bedroom by the elf, instead of to the study or one of the parlours. Only too gladly had he accepted the assignment to transport one of the communication mirrors to Nott House to give to his godson.

“Why do they need to rest?” the little Nott boy asked, swinging his legs where he was sitting on one of the tall stools in the potions laboratory of the house.

“Dad said that they were doing some pretty complicated magic yesterday, and now they’re tired,” Marcus answered with an air of seriousness that was kind of amusing in a kid as young as he was.

And so it went back and forth, and Severus had a few moments to contemplate what exactly had gone down in Malfoy Manor the day before. It was entirely possible that the Dark Lord had attempted to remove the soul shard from his heir on the night of the blue moon they had had yesterday. That both were alive – if forced to rest – was promising, but no sure indication that it actually had worked. If that what even what they had tried to do.

Severus would need to get some more information to be sure of what had happened and if it had worked. If it was tied to the soul shard Dumbledore had claimed was residing in young Harry, Severus was pretty sure that his Lord would make sure a positive outcome would become known in some way.

“But isn’t your brother as old as Theo? Father told Theo that he’s not allowed to perform magic during the holidays,” Aiden said, drawing Severus’ attention.

“Actually,” Severus interjected, “if under the supervision of a parent, a child may perform magic outside of school. The important part being the supervision. Speaking of which, I’m finished with setting up.” Both boys perked up significantly, making Severus smile one of his almost-not-there smiles. “Let me move you closer.” A wave of his wand was enough to bring the boys over to the high working bench Severus had prepared. “Now pay attention.” Teaching smaller groups than a normal class was a lot more agreeable to him. Seeing how the two boys concentrated on him and his words, so eager to learn, was a balm on his frayed nerves. “When working with knives, as we will be doing today, you need to make sure to keep your fingers clear of the blade. If you’re not using your knife you will place it over your cutting board, closer to the middle of the workbench than to the edge, so it will not fall.” Severus demonstrated what he had explained with slow and slightly exaggerated movements. “Show me,” he encouraged the boys to copy his movements, and had a harder time hiding his smile as Marcus repeated what he had been shown with his tongue poking out just slightly.

“Well done. Now place your knife back down and watch. I’ll demonstrate how to best cut herbs into pieces if a specific size isn’t required.” Severus waited until both Aiden and Marcus had placed their knives down before he started to show and explain how to cut with a rocking motion. Later he would let the boys work a handful of beetles into a fine powder. That would be a good
way to end the lesson, something fun and not too complicated.

“That’s really fun, Uncle Sev!” Marcus called out, carefully cutting some fresh mint to shreds, getting a little enthusiastic.

“I know, Marcus. Please be careful and don’t move too fast. When you start out you should move slowly until you get more practice.” Seeing Marcus react on the spot, slowing down, was so different from the unheeded advice he called out in his classroom at Hogwarts. Small children in small groups were maybe easier then pre-teens in groups close to twenty.

“How will you tell us a story later? Aiden’s dad isn’t really good at telling them, and dad needs to go to bed early today.” Marcus nodded decisively, “He said I can stay another night here. So will you tell us a story?”

For a moment Severus had a refusal on his lips, but then he thought it might be good practice. Soon enough he would be a father himself, and even though the baby would not be able to comprehend a story at first, a time would come when he had to tell bedtime stories.

“Do you two have a favourite story? Marcus? Aiden?”

“The fountain of fair fortune!” Marcus called out, thrusting a small fist into the air.

“Jack and the Beanstalk!” was Aiden’s favourite, called out just as loudly as Marcus had been.

Severus nodded seriously. “I know them both. How do we determine which story I’ll tell?”

For a moment the boys were thinking, then Marcus got a dangerous gleam in his eyes and a small grin spread over his face. “Tell both!”

Severus chuckled, that was a simple solution for the problem, and in favour of the boys. “Only if you manage to keep concentrating through the next two ingredients.”

Eager nodding signalled the boys agreement, and Severus exchanged the cutting boards. “Now let us cut some carrots. They are not really used in potions, but their structure is similar to some other plant roots that are used in potions, and therefore they are perfect to practice on.” Especially as many other roots were poisonous and better substituted for if one was working with young children. “Look closely.”

oooOOooo

Saturday, 3rd of August 1996

Letting his gaze wander over the crowd populating the gardens of Potter Manor, Harry sighed a little. It would have been nice to have a birthday party like the one Draco had had a few weeks back. Too bad that it was necessary for as many people as possible to see that Harry was well, and they had invited everyone.

And that meant everyone.

All the Department Heads from the Ministry were there. Amelia Bones was playing with Marcus
and the other younger children, Minister Fudge was over by the buffet filling a plate with the delicious cake Flimm and Henbane had prepared for this party. The Weasleys had been invited as well. All of Harry’s year-mates had been invited! It felt like a bigger crowd than had been attending the World Cup the summer before fourth year. Not that it was, but it felt like it.

“There you are!”

Harry turned from his spot to come face to face with Ron, who looked as if he had spent days outside in the sun.

“Ron! I’m happy you could make it! Your family has an odd tendency to be late!” Harry chuckled, feeling the urge to hug his friend, but refraining, because he had no idea how Ron would react.

He made a face. “Ginny couldn’t decide what to wear, and Mum sent the twins back more than once to empty out their pockets. I’m sure they brought some of the canary creams anyway.” Ron thrust a box wrapped in red paper sprinkled with fluttering golden snitches at Harry. “Here, I hope you like it!”

Harry accepted the present with a smile. “Thanks! Good thing you arrived after the receiving line was finished. So I can open it now and don’t have to wait until later. Have you seen the table with all those gifts?” Harry shook his head. Dudley would pale if he could see the number of presents Harry had been given for his sixteenth birthday. “Let’s go over to the others. Luna has found a nice mossy spot over there, and said she would gather the others so we can stay away from all the political stuff.”

“That’s a good idea!” Ron’s relief was obvious in his voice, which made Harry laugh. He felt so light he could dance.

“Then let’s go.” Abandoning his task of gathering food for their group – he could ask Flimm to deliver them a basket, anyway; the elf would be happy – Harry clutched the parcel closer to his chest and carefully chose a path through the decorated garden. He didn’t plan to be intercepted and drawn into a long and boring conversation.

They dodged a few groups of Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, and hastily ducked behind a pair of corpulent wizards – in garish robes – to hide from a group of Marcus and his friends, before reaching a small copse of birches, slipping through the branches into the centre.

“Harry! Ron! Come on, sit down!” Hermione waved her arms in their direction, while Luna was plucking small flowers from the ground, weaving a flower-crown, and Draco helped Theo to drape blankets over the ground so they could sit comfortably.

“That looks cosy,” Harry remarked, walking over to the blanket already smoothed out and sitting down tailor-fashion. This was much more comfortable than the floor in the Malfoys’ ritual room.

“Did you forget about the food?” Daphne demanded, sitting down much more gracefully than Harry had done, shooting him a playful glare.

“No I did not.” Harry glared right back, carefully setting the present down on the blanket before him. “Flimm!” he called the house elf assigned to him and Marcus, who appeared a moment later with a soft popping sound.

“How can Flimm help young Master Harry and his friends?” Flimm asked, bowing as was his way.

“Please bring us a basket with a variety of the food from the buffet, Flimm. And if father searches for me, let him know that I have retreated with my friends for a little bit of quiet.”
“Flimm will do that, young Master Harry.” The elf bowed again and was gone. Before they could say a word, a basket filled to the brim appeared next to Harry.

“I agree that was better than trying to sneak food from the buffet,” Draco said, bending over the basket and plucking out a small pastry. “There’s a pitcher of lemonade in here, and glasses.”

It didn’t take long until they all were sitting on blankets in the speckled light and shade of the leaves moving in the light breeze, happily eating cake, pastries, and other delicious confections.

“Open the present, Harry. I’m really curious what Ron got you, and I don’t think Gran will let me stay long enough to get to see you unwrapping that mountain of presents in the floo room,” Neville said, handing the lemonade to Daphne, who accepted with a murmured thanks.

Harry laughed, but complied with Neville’s request by putting his plate down and picking the present up. “Sure. I fear that I’ll have to spend hours unwrapping presents, and even more hours writing all those thank-you notes.” With a grin towards Ron, Harry pretended to carefully unstick the spell-o-tape before he ripped the paper to shreds.

The falling paper revealed a big book about dragons. The title was *Dragon Anatomy and Scale Patterns*, and it was quite a hefty tome. “Cool!” Harry opened the book, and the first thing he saw was a detailed sketch of the muscles that enabled dragons to fly.

“Charlie said it’s the best book on how dragons are built. And Hermione said such books help artists to create good pictures of things. I hope you can use it.” Ron’s ears had turned red.

“It’s great, Ron! In the one-week course I had on sketching poses, we worked a lot with anatomical references. This is a really good book and present, thank you!” It had been a good course, but Harry wasn’t sure if he wanted to look closer into portraits and the human form. But magical creatures were something different.

“Glad you like it.” Ron said, quickly averting his eyes, and concentrating on his plate of chocolate cake.

“You haven’t told us yet if you were accepted in Filch’s art class,” Theo said, from where he was sitting near the edge of the clearing, peering out from time to time, as if he was searching for something or someone. “We know you got an Outstanding both in Defence and Potions – I still can’t really believe that one – and an Acceptable in History, of all things! But you didn’t tell us if you were accepted into the arts class.” Theo threw Harry a look before turning back to watch the people milling about outside their hiding place.

“Yes, I was accepted, and I got a long list of supplies I need to buy. It seems that we’ll be making our own paints.” Harry felt himself blush, and automatically drew his hand through his hair. The letter that Mr. Filch had written and sent on the same day his OWL results and normal school letter had been sent, had been really flattering. And demanding. Filch was convinced that Harry could become a great artist if he applied himself and practiced. Daily. It had been mortifying and encouraging all at once.

“Harry!” Hermione suddenly exclaimed, pointing at Harry, or more accurately his forehead. “You scar! It’s… it’s almost gone!”

And there was the first person noticing the change, and also mentioning it. Harry wasn’t sure Hermione truly was the first to notice, but most of the adults were politicians and unlikely to speak about something like this. It was the reason Harry had agreed readily to inviting basically everyone, so that as many people as possible could – hopefully would – notice the change and
speak about it. They needed for everyone to know so that those in the know about the horcrux would learn it was gone without them needing to tell anyone.

“Yeah,” Harry nodded with a small smile. “Father found something that works on reducing the scarring. We hope it’ll be gone almost completely in a few years.” And they did. Professor Snape had brewed a special scar-reducing cream that Harry was putting on every night before going to bed.

“That’s great!” Hermione gushed, a knowing look in her eyes. And through the following discussions of plans which classes they all planned to take up to NEWTs, Daphne’s attempts to get her parents to agree to a betrothal to the muggleborn wizard she had fallen in love with, Ron’s enthusiastic tales about his time at the Dragon Reserve, Harry noticed the looks.

Draco seemed to have figured out that this was somehow tied to the ritual Harry had taken part in just before his birthday. Theo seemed still to be puzzling things out, in between kissing Ginny, who had found them after they had half-finished their basket.

Neville seemed to know more about the whole horcrux debacle than Harry had thought he would. Maybe his gran had told him about what Dumbledore had revealed to the order in an attempt to gain their loyalty when he had started to lose control of the situation back in the last year. Or maybe Neville had overheard enough to put the pieces together.

Harry decided to not bring it up, just as Marvolo and he had discussed beforehand. The ritual they had done was absolutely illegal if anyone ever got to know it existed and put it on the list with other rituals of a similar design. They wanted it known that the horcrux was removed and that Harry was no longer an obstacle between Death and Marvolo, but they couldn’t admit to performing rituals. Even when the horcrux in Harry had been removed through the only known way before Marvolo had started to search for an alternative.

In fact, Marvolo still wasn’t sure his regret for Harry’s mother’s death had been great and heartfelt enough to make what had happened possible.

“Come on, let’s play a round of Quidditch!” Draco suddenly said, getting up from the ground, brushing down his fancy robes. “I’m sure we can get enough people to have two full teams, and find an adult to charm a pair of those kiddie bludgers, so we can play almost like at Hogwarts.” Draco rolled his eyes at mentioning the kiddie bludgers, making Harry laugh.

“That’s a good idea. Otherwise father might come search for me. Can’t really get out of the job of entertaining my guests at my own birthday party.” Looking around the clearing, Harry saw a lot of dirty plates, empty glasses, and blankets with crumbs on them. “Flimm? Please clean up here.” Hermione gave him a shove on one of his shoulders, giving him an accusing look. “Please.” Hermione nodded approvingly and followed the others out of their hiding place, leaving a grinning Harry behind.

Life was good. And Harry was looking forward to their next year at Hogwarts.

ooOoo

“You look content.” Amelia half stated, half asked of Marvolo as she stepped up to the part of the buffet with child-proofing charms around it. She really wanted to have some wine right about now.
She had forgotten how demanding a small child could be compared to a teenager.

Marvolo hummed, considering, before he smiled, toasting with his own glass of red wine. “Probably because I am.”

“So whatever you had planned is finished?” Amelia, of course, was aware of the possibility of being overheard, but without the context of that worrying meeting when Marvolo explained his plans to rewrite his will, no one should be able to use any of what they were speaking of now against either of them.

“Yes. It worked out differently from what I had planned. But it did work out in the end.” When Marvolo smirked, Amelia narrowed her eyes, which made him smirk even more. “No more planned scaring Amelia almost to death.” That he held his hand over his heart didn’t help Amelia stay serious. But she did her best to glare at him anyway.

When he started to chuckle, Amelia lost it too. “You’re terrible. You do know that, don’t you?” He only nodded unrepentantly, smiling a true smile.

“I wanted to ask you something for a while now. You know that there’s an enchantment on the Wizengamot Chamber alerting the Aurors on guard to identity-concealing spellwork. It’s not perfect. For instance it doesn’t react at all to Metamorphmagi but reacts to even the smallest cosmetic charm. And... well, it’s kind of silly, but you have registered with those charms every single time that you were inside the chambers. I know that it isn’t my place to ask, but I have to confess that I’m seriously curious why you would constantly have such a small charm on you that registers with those enchantments…” Amelia trailed off, blushing. She had been curious for a while now, but never felt the moment was right to ask. And now she wasn’t so sure that it was worth asking at all.

Marvolo smiled a little sadly at her question, making Amelia feel even more uncomfortable. She should just not have asked. “Some things seem to leave their marks. And I’d rather not remind people just looking at me of an uncomfortable past.”

That hadn’t really answered her question, but asking for clarification would be more than rude. So she just nodded and changed the topic again. If he had some scales on his face he wanted to hide, he was totally allowed to do that.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Ok, hands up: who suspected I would solve the last horcrux in this way? Not sure if it was obvious before, but I had planned it this way from the start. Feels good to finally have written this part of the end. I have an epilogue planned after this. And then that's it!

Thanks to Jordre and Jake for helping to improve my spelling!

First published on the 27th of September 2019
Next chapter planned for 3rd of October 2019 (exactly four years after I published the very first chapter)
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

CW: Suicide, Major Character Dead, nothing graphic

This is for Sharis B who asked me a question but didn’t leave me a way to answer. Please create an account on ffnet and write me a private message so I can answer your question. For everyone else: here is the end of this story. I hope it is a good conclusion as this is another part I had planned from the start.

Harry watched with unease as his father carefully moved over the meticulously prepared floor, drawing the lines of a runic circle. He really wished that this wasn’t happening, but as he had known for decades by now, Marvolo was set to perform this ritual. To make sure that the information on Horcruxes and all their drawbacks would be available to everyone contemplating their use, in the hope of giving them enough information to make them reconsider.

“Harry, please, you knew as well as I that this was coming. And as sorry as I am that Father will no longer be with us… the fact that there’s something he fears more than death is a big step for him.” Marcus had come over to stand with Harry, placing a hand on his shoulder in an attempt to console his older brother.

“I know that Father fears dementia more than he fears death. But with everything he managed to invent, why does he insist on this ritual?! He could stay with us for several decades still!” Harry wanted to pace, but refrained because he didn’t want to agitate his wife – Tara was standing with their five daughters and their partners – so he dropped his voice down to almost a whisper and moderated his gestures. “Don’t you wish that he would be with us longer?”

“Harry,” Marcus sighed, clearly struggling with how to word what he wanted to say. “Yes, it’s true that I wish Father would stay. I would like for him to be still here when my youngest graduates, and I become a grandfather. But he has planned this for so long.” Marcus trailed off, looking back to where his wife and husband were talking to their adult children and their spouses. Harry still was happy that he and Marvolo had managed to make marriages of more than two people legal, so that those families built with the use of Severus’ completion of the Anteros Potion could legally stay together, with all the advantages, for instance the handling of material possessions such as houses. That both Marcus and his husband liked women as well had made for an interesting family dynamic from Harry’s point of view.

“But you know how obsessed he’s been with making sure others don’t repeat his error. Making sure every magical library will hold a copy of his book as long as there are individuals able to perform the magic needed to split a soul… I can understand why he wants that.” Harry huffed. Marcus was always so reasonable about everything. Even after all those years, his sorting into Ravenclaw was still obvious and understandable.

“You’ll make a great Lord Slytherin.” Harry had taken the position as Lord Potter after he had finished his apprenticeship in art on the continent. But when he never had a son, only girls, they had transferred the title of Heir Slytherin to Marcus, who had several sons able to speak...
“I still struggle with being that diplomatic.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, Harry. You and father have come far in removing a lot of the bad laws and senseless bans. And you’re a renowned artist.” Marcus once again placed his hand on Harry’s shoulder, shaking him a little. “You did finish that portrait of father. We won’t lose him completely.”

Harry brushed his brother’s hand away. Marcus really was trying to comfort him, but Harry didn’t want to be comforted. “Portraits are not my main… Please, Marcus, let me wallow in my guilt and grief. The fact that we needed to go to Albania for this should be hint enough that this isn’t some benign magic. And regardless of my understanding of father’s reasons for this,” Harry waved his hand around the rune circle, the pyre, and the members of their family gathered around, “I still would rather keep my father.” Harry would have been happy if there was no country allowing the use of a willing human sacrifice, because as bizarre as it was, his father wouldn’t go against the law to do this.

Marcus sighed and embraced Harry. “I know, brother, I would rather keep him too.”

While Marcus wandered back towards his immediate family, Harry turned around to wait for other guests, fighting to keep his Occlumency going.

When he saw who had just arrived Harry smiled a little, despite the tense situation. “Severus, Sonja, I’m happy you could make it.” Harry embraced first Sonja – her hair gone completely grey by now – and then Severus, once again marvelling how much their relationship had changed since Severus had been Professor Snape.

“We are too,” Sonja said with a sad smile. “Sadly, the twins couldn’t make it. As the Heads of Slytherin and Gryffindor,” Severus made a face while his wife explained, but it was obvious that Severus was only joking, as he had done since the younger of the twins had been sorted into Gryffindor, “they had to go to the school early to prepare everything.”

Desperate and full of tension, Harry turned fully towards Severus. “Please, Severus, did you find anything to cure father? If we could remove the reason father wants to go through with this ritual of his now, he could stop!” Harry knew the possibility that Severus had found something was slim, but he also knew that Severus didn’t want his friend and Lord to die either.

“The healers haven’t found anything, and I haven’t found anything either. The onset of dementia is clearly tied to the fact that Marvolo’s body was created through a dark magical ritual. Short of creating a new body and transferring his mind and soul to it, there is no way. And you know enough to realise that such an endeavour would be dark magic as well.” Severus was patient – much more patient than he had been as a Potions Professor – while he explained.

“I know.” Harry’s voice was small and defeated.

“And I’m sure you tried to find a way to bind a book to the existence of magical humans, so it’ll appear in all magical libraries, that doesn’t need a willing human sacrifice.” Harry nodded. He had tried, he really had. But it was useless. The requirements that Marvolo had written down for the ritual, and that he insisted on needed to be met, demanded a level of power that wasn’t to be gained any other way. “I wish I didn’t understand why father wants to do this. But I do… kind of.” Making sure no other desperate teenager would find fragmented information, making a horrible mistake… Harry did understand. But he was anything but happy.

When Marvolo finished, he called everyone over. Marcus and Harry walked over to say their goodbyes. Lots of tears were shed as the Head of their families said farewell to everyone.
Harry really didn’t want to let him go and held the embrace even as Marvolo carefully indicated that it was time to let go. **:Please, my son. I love you, but knowing that I will lose myself, I’d rather perform this ritual, giving my life willingly, than become a burden to you, your brother, and your families:**.

Harry’s hissed reply was almost choked with his tears. **:I love you. I’ll miss you:**.

Later, Harry would only remember snatches of the ritual: Marvolo climbing onto the pyre, his book – to be magically bound to be available everywhere, anytime – and an athame the only things with him.

The sound of blood and the flare of the fire starting and consuming the body of Lord Marvolo Slytherin.

An important part of Harry’s life had just ended. Later Tara wrapped her arms around Harry, offering her silent support as their daughters who had finished school – the youngest one hadn’t been able to come – gathered around them. There was a future here. With time Harry would learn to look forward and remember his father fondly. But for today and the near future he would mourn his father.

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank you all for four years of fun. If there had been no reaction to my story I don’t know if I would have finished it. It was a lot of work and a lot of fun as well as a good practice for my English and writing skills. Not sure what I’ll be writing next, but I’m sure I’ll keep writing.

People have mentioned this should have a warning and as I can see where they are coming from with this I decided to add it.
That I leave a lot of the side plots open and some changes unexplained is intentional and matches with what I like about stories. I know it's not to everyone's taste and am aware that there is a lot that could be written still, but I wanted to concentrate on Harry, Marvolo, and Severus and their start of healing. The world and people around them were important to show them and their journey, which is why I decided to not start concentrating on them instead.

Once again I want to express my thanks to Jordre and Jake who have helped me remove a great many of my usual errors and typos from the chapters before I published them. It was a delight working with them.

First published on the 3rd of October 2019 (exactly four years after I published the very first chapter)
Last edited on 11th of October 2019

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