Deathly Deals, And Deals with Death

by Reavv

Summary

It says something, they think, that the first mortal being to summon Death since the spread of Christianity does so unknowingly. Lily Evans is desperate, and dying, and most of all, extremely clever. The call she sends out into the void is probably meant for a more benevolent god, but really, very few of those exist anymore.

So Death steps out of the shadow of a dying woman’s breath and crouches down to see her face. Glassy eyes meet theirs, but there’s enough intelligence there that they can tell, without a doubt, that this will be interesting.

“My life for his,” the woman says, struggling to breathe, but with every pained exhale they can feel the timer slowing down. Magic is keeping her stable, repairing the damage that only they can see.

The Killing Curse is supposed to be immediate. This time, it's obvious it failed.
Chapter 1

It says something, they think, that the first mortal being to summon Death since the spread of Christianity does so unknowingly. Lily Evans is desperate, and dying, and most of all, extremely clever. The call she sends out into the void is probably meant for a more benevolent god, but really, very few of those exist anymore.

So Death steps out of the shadow of a dying woman’s breath and crouches down to see her face. Glassy eyes meet theirs, but there’s enough intelligence there that they can tell, without a doubt, that this will be interesting.

“My life for his,” the woman says, struggling to breathe, but with every pained exhale they can feel the timer slowing down. Magic is keeping her stable, repairing the damage that only they can see.

The Killing Curse is supposed to be immediate. This time, it’s obvious it failed.

Death finally takes a look at where the woman is desperately pointing. The crib in the centre of the room, still and silent, already tells them what they need to know.

“He won’t have long. You do not have much to bargain with,” they say, touching a finger to her heaving chest. Already the seed of cancer has been planted there, in the form of a lightning burn.

“Whatever I have, I give to him,” the woman says, unconcerned it seems by the idea of the half life she begs for him.

It is not in Death’s control to give someone life. But they can switch around someone's death easily enough, and it matters very little in the grand scheme of things whether one mortal dies or the other. But it is not something they do often. It tends to have consequences.

“Why?”

The woman sighs, a long, drawn out affair.

“I love him, of course I do. But if love were enough I would not need your help. They think I don't know, that they are being subtle in their planning, but I figured it out. They think my son can end the war. That it's—fate.”

Death hums.

“Fate has very little to do with the lives of mortals.”

The woman laughs. It’s only slightly unhinged.

“Still, he needs to be alive to make that choice. The Dark Lord is gone for now, but the war is not over...and maybe I am selfish, to put such a terrible weight on the shoulders of a child, but—”

“You are tired. You have been tired for a while,” Death finishes.

“I thought magic would make everything better. That I had finally found a place to belong. I was wrong,” she agrees, eyes roaming the nursery like she will find salvation somewhere in the smoking wood.

“I love him, I do,” she repeats. It has the cadence of something practiced.
Death has met many mortals during their long existence. Sometimes it is not the body that dies first. Life is a slow death, and it hits everyone differently. At least they have the option to stop it.

“Very well,” they say, rising slowly, “but let it be known that whatever consequence comes with such a deal will not be light. A thing that is dead cannot ever breathe life easily, afterwards.”

Lily Evans nods, a wry smile on her lips, and breathes her last breath. Across the room a child starts crying.

—

Harry Potter is an easy child. Quiet but cheerful, he requires very little looking after. Which is good, because there is not much his guardians would like to do less than look after him.

His cousin gets more attention, more food, more toys, but Harry is content with the hand me downs and leftovers he’s given; able to take even the most broken of gifts and find something of use for it. He doesn’t cost the Dursleys much, in the end, but they hate him anyways.

That might be because although Harry is an easy child, he is also a rather odd one. Despite their repeated punishments concerning his invisible friends he still talks to thin air, plays games with people who aren’t there, and knows things he shouldn’t. And at night he sometimes mumbles gibberish, which the Dursleys solve by locking him in the stairwell closet where no one can hear him.

He also doesn’t seem to care about anything. He laughs off his cousin’s bullying, his bad grades, the Dursleys’ attempt to brand him as a delinquent. And he doesn’t let his family’s efforts to stifle him stick.

There’s a very good reason for that.

“Just because you can’t die doesn’t mean you should court it,” Death says with a sigh, sitting on his bedspread. Harry laughs, but it’s choked and smothered by the series of coughs that follow.

“Not much I can do about that, s’not like the Dursleys are going to feed me more anyways,” he says, skinny shoulders shrugging. He’s sick, but it’s the kind of sick that comes more from exhaustion and bad nutrition, not a virus. But like Death keeps reminding him, it won’t kill him.

“Then you must look elsewhere for sustenance.”

Harry sighs and starts picking at his overly large shirt. It feels starchy and uncomfortable under his fingers, but he has a hard time imagining anything else.

“You know how hard it is to buy things as a kid? S’not like I have money anyways, but adults always start asking where my parents are, or if I should be in school, and with Dudley bumbling about in the cafeteria it’s not like I can go there either.”

Death stares at him silently, the stare of something that hasn’t had to blink in a millenia, and taps one long finger on the bedspread. Harry snorts, but smiles at the mannerism.

“Oh sure, I was able to repair the sheets, but I can’t just conjure up food the same way.” He pauses. “Can I?”

Death shrugs.
“Maybe, but you are probably too young for it. No, I was thinking of a more mundane solution. Money isn’t an issue if you have goods to sell, and you are proficient enough at sewing magically you would have quite a bit to sell.”

That’s another thing his family hates, and it’s probably why they don’t mind letting him be sick and out of view of the neighbourhood. Harry is magic, and his magic goes into anything he touches and infects it. Or so his aunt likes saying.

Harry himself thinks it’s more like a symptom instead of a sickness. Something strange happened when he died, and it shows in everything he is. Magic pours out of him like he’s a sieve, and there’s no way for him to control it. Death says it’s because magic is a thing of life, and he no longer quite fits that. So it tries to escape.

Sewing helps. He can coax it into repairing the various holes and rips in his hand me downs, and by using a needle and thread he can at least direct the magic instead of letting it go wherever.

“So what, I should sew a bunch of blankets and...what? Where would I even sell them?”

Death shrugs. It has very little interest in the markets of mortal means, and as far as it is concerned the use of an arbitrary capital is silly and slightly sad.

“At least you would be using enough magic that it wouldn’t spill out onto other things, like insects.”

Harry shudders. He doesn’t want to see any more twitchy, half-dead roaches ever again. Seeing ghosts is one thing, necromancy is so far from ideal he feels his insides roll just thinking about it.

The sound of banging feet on the roof of his cupboard rings out, raining dust into his hair, and he sighs.

“Guess I’ll have to think of something,” he says, stretching his limbs and brushing the dust off. “Thanks, anyways. You don’t have to keep me company like this all the time.”

“It’s no problem,” Death says. “You’re the only half-dead son I have.”

Harry smiles, and then wakes up.

—

Death isn’t really his mother. Death is Death, and even though Lily Evans is dead that doesn’t change the fact that she’s not Death.

But Death shows up in Harry’s dreams with red hair and green eyes, a female body, lips curved upwards. Death has stars in her shadow and fire in her eyes, but she looks human enough. Sometimes Harry can even forget the glimpses he sees of otherness, the elk horns bleached bone white by time and the smell of wet earth slowly decaying.

Death doesn’t say anything about the times that even Harry has to look away from her face, the way it bends and twists in the light like it’s wax slowly melting. Death doesn’t turn away from him when he cries at the unfairness of his limited time, of his limited life. Death shows him that living is always worth doing, but it’s not the end.

When asked about an afterlife, Death laughs and laughs and laughs.

Religion has nothing on a thing that existed before humans did. Death could try to explain what happens to life when it passes her realm, but there’s no good way to shrink it down into words that
humans would understand.

“I don’t know if that means there isn’t a god,” Harry says to Jimmy.

Jimmy is an old man, wrinkled and grey with time. Even in death he looks like a stiff breeze would knock him over. Harry very deliberately doesn’t look at the gaping wound where his left arm should be.

“The question humanity has been asking for centuries,” Jimmy says with a smile that has more missing teeth than good ones. Jimmy died in an explosion, some sort of gas main thing, but he always laughs at the irony that it happened on home soil and not while he was watching his brothers get exploded in Vietnam.

“It seems dumb, I don’t know why Ms. Darlene needs to know it,” he complains, kicking out his feet idly. Ms. Darlene is his History teacher, and they’re going over the rise of Christianity in class right now. She seems particularly fervent about it.

“Why don’t you say that, then?” Isabella asks from behind him, leaning over to see his homework. Isabella is even older than Jimmy, though she doesn’t look it. She always says she died from scarlet fever but that doesn’t explain the hole in her chest. Harry sometimes wonders if she even notices it’s there.

“She won’t like that,” he says in thought, but with a smile slowly forming. It’s not like he’s attached to his grades considering what happens when he does better than Dudley. He’s quite content learning what he wants outside school and doing the bare minimum in class.

“All the better then,” Isabella says, drifting away a little. Jimmy snorts, before he too fades.

Harry has gotten good at realising when the ghost leave because they want to, and when they are making way for something bigger. A chill sweeps them all, bringing about it the smell of rain and disease.

A dark swirl that is more emotion than thought settles on Harry’s side, and he sighs.

“Hello again,” he says. “Are you going to tell me your name today?”

The cloud shivers, but all he can hear from it is the sound of distant bells. Some ghosts are like Isabella and Jimmy, concrete and present. Some are like Harry’s cloud: wispy things with no shape that have forgotten most of their life already.

Sometimes he sees them following a single person, and it’s those people he knows to stay away from. Nothing good attracts the sort of formless emotion that the clouds are.

(He tries not to think about what that says about himself.)

“Well it’s not like I was going to get much done, anyways,” he says with a sigh, standing up and dusting himself off. “What do you got for me?”

Another shiver from the cloud and then a tug pulls him away from his bench. He follows it obediently, hand in his pockets and shoulders slouched. It’s warm out, even with the cloud’s chill, and he’s been able to sneak breakfast this morning, so all in all he’s feeling pretty happy with life right now.

It’s not a far walk before the cloud stops, forcing Harry to slow as well. They’re in a neighbouring park, closer to the richer side of the suburbs. In his drab, large clothing and his messy hair he looks
completely out of place next to the shiny metal and pastel plastic. Luckily there’s only one person there, and they aren’t paying any attention to him.

“That’s them, then?” He asks, already moving forward. The rolling cloud shivers again, black strands curling around his hands.

The girl is maybe a few years older than him, but the great gulping breaths she’s taking make her seem much younger. Harry has never really understood the illusion that vulnerability is young, but it doesn’t change the fact that it takes him a second to recognise her as an upperclassman.

“Hey,” he says softly when he gets close, “in and out now, you’re going to hyperventilate like that.”

Both the girl and the cloud shudder.

“Fuck off,” she says with trembling lips, and Harry smiles. He sits down next to her, close enough that he can feel the cloud reach out for her, but far enough that he’s not crowding her.

There’s silence for a bit, interspersed with the girl’s crying, before she finally lifts her head.

“What do you want, then?” she says, wiping furiously at her face.

“What do you want?” Harry returns, crossing his legs. The girl glares at him.

“Not to be pestered by some brat while I’m having a breakdown in the park, that’s for sure,” she sniffles. She doesn’t leave though. Harry finds very few of the people the cloud finds for him leave.

“My parents are going to disown me as soon as the school gossip gets around to them, my uncle just had a heart attack and now I have no place to run to, and to make things worse I think I’m going to fail math,” she says in a rush, rubbing even harder at her face.

“That’s not all, though,” Harry says with certainty. The girl takes deep gulping breaths, but leans back a little out of her slouch. The blood she’s been hiding glints in the sunlight.

“It’s stupid. I didn’t even mean it,” she says angrily. “I fell though. After all that talk of being stronger and getting back at them, of living. I got so angry I didn’t even see the car. And now they’re going to say I killed myself, that I was troubled.”

Harry nods. He knows a lot about adults labeling him based off of things that aren’t even true.

The girl settles a little after all that, breathing stabilising into something normal. The cloud at his side shivers, something similar to a sigh. She snaps her head up.

“Who the fuck is that?”

The cloud ripples with feeling, expanding for a second before condensing into a single point. It drifts slowly to the girl, hovering over her cupped hands. From somewhere far away a sound not unlike a voice rings out.

Harry stands up, his job done. He leaves the two ghosts to their grief, to their reunion. This is something the living have no part of.

(What is a soul, Death asks, and what is a ghost? What is an obscurus and what is a child? What is a wizard and what is a muggle? They are the same thing, in the end.)
Harry is almost eleven. Which means almost eleven of his mother’s years have passed.

Death doesn’t have much to say about wizards, besides that his mother was one, so he doesn’t know a whole lot besides the fact that they exist. And that they will eventually come for him.

He’s not sure how much he likes the thought. On one hand, no more Dursley’s, on the other hand, what he does know about wizards make him hesitant. He’s not sure he’ll end up being a good one: his magic is so unstable it’s almost laughable.

Harry has never seen any wizarding ghosts. It’s a strange thought to have. He wonders if they just don’t become ghosts when they die, or if there’s just so few that it’s never happened near Privet Drive. He already knows he won’t be a ghost. Won’t even pass on to wherever Death’s realm leads to. Jimmy says it’s because Death is possessive, but Death only says it’s a side effect of his mother’s deal.

That’s ok though, he doesn’t think he’ll mind staying in Death’s realm. It’s a strange place, with glowing fae lights and giant trees casting shadows on the green earth. It’s a place that’s strangely vibrant, for being dead.

And Death itself is not bad company, despite the oddness of mannerism.

“Boy!” his aunt yells, and he looks up from the book he’s reading to see her pursed lips. Petunia’s lips are almost always pursed when looking at him, so he doesn’t pay much attention to it.

“Throw that trash away and do your chores, I don’t have time for your laziness today. Dudley’s birthday is soon, and I need to make sure the house is spotless.”

Harry smiles and very deliberately doesn’t mention that the boy won’t care. Dudley could live in a pig sty as long as it had food and toys.

He tucks the fantasy novel into his oversized pockets and stretches out of the sprawl he has twisted himself into.

“Of course,” he says, laughing a little inside at the way Petunia’s eyes twitch. She’s never appreciated either compliance or rebellion. Nothing is ever good enough for dear Aunt Petunia. It’s a good thing Harry doesn’t care at this point.

Harry’s chores are less than what Petunia would like him to have, but his magic makes using him for certain things a gamble she isn’t willing to take. He ends up mostly relegated to the garden, where there’s less things for him to break and the high walls keep him from nosy eyes.

Harry doesn’t even mind the garden, likes the feeling of dirt on his hands and the smell of growing things. But it’s a pain when it’s hot out and he can’t go back inside, sweat budding against his back and turning his grip slack.

The garden is also more interesting. It’s where he made his first re-animated insect, where he talked to his first snake, where he saw his first ghost.

Mimi is a cat, caramel coloured with white patches, and she twines around his legs while he works, wispy paws daintily walking over daisies and morning glories. He thinks she gets lonely with no one to pet her, so he doesn’t mind the heat if it means running his hands through her soft fur and being able to listen to her rough purr. Unlike a lot of his human ghosts she has no obvious injuries, and he hopes that means it was natural.

When he’s gone there won’t be anyone to keep her company, and that more than anything tears him.
up a little. Animals don’t understand why you leave them. He won’t be able to say goodbye.

“What do you think, Mimi,” he says with a whisper, “should I take you with me?”

She butts her head against his palm and purrs, tail swishing back and forth. He smiles at her.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

A few days later Dudley turns eleven, and continues to show his complete disregard for anything that isn’t himself. Petunia and Vernon continue to spoil him far beyond logical parental love.

Harry meets a nice snake who wants to go to Brazil, meets a few more ghosts (none of which want to go to Brazil) and finally finishes the last batch of sewing projects he had planned. He’ll need to wait before he can find anymore fabric to work with, but so far he has a few blankets, some pillow coverings, and a few stuffed animals. The only one he knows for sure will sell is the small cat toy for Miss Figg.

He hasn’t reanimated any insects, but he has somehow taught one of the petunias in the garden to wilt when it sees its namesake.

All in all, he isn’t expecting the letters.

—

Harry isn’t stupid enough to show his family the letter. Anything sent to him would get shredded pretty quick, and he can tell just based off of the address that this is something magic-related.

He stuffs it into the lining of his pants and wanders back with the rest of the letters and papers, ignoring his cousin’s jeers. He’s able to snag a plate of toast and eggs before being shooed out the door to do his chores. That’s fine, no one ever bothers him when he’s in the garden, and he’s able to take out the letter without anyone noticing.

“Hmm,” he hums in thought, absent-mindedly petting Mimi with one hand. The paper is thick, slightly rough, but it’s the words that really pique his interest.

“School, huh?” He rifles through the papers, eyes skipping over the rather sparse introduction until he gets to the equipment list.

“Oh look, they say you can bring a pet. Wanna come to a magic school with me?” he asks Mimi, before his attention gets pulled away again. A ghostly hand is poking out of the hedge, and he quickly gathers the paper together before standing up and peeking over the edge.

The girl from the park is staring curiously at the bushes, inserting an arm and pulling it out again. The cloud is hanging over her shoulders like an affectionate cat.

“Oh it’s you,” she says when she sees him, withdrawing her arm nonchalantly.

“What are you doing?” he asks, pulling himself further up.

She shrugs.

“It feels different,” she says, “like, you can feel the pockets of air between the brambles.”

Harry thinks about that, curiosity tugging at his mind again. None of the other ghosts he’s met have ever talked about sensations they’ve got left, but then again most of them have been dead a while. After a while it would probably become background noise for them.
“What’s that?” the girl asks, nodding towards the packet of paper in his hands, and he has to fight the urge to hide it.

“School acceptance letter,” he says instead. “It’s a little weird.”

She stares at him for a second.

“Aren’t you in like, elementary? What kind of school needs an acceptance letter?”

Harry silently hands it over, watching as she fumbles with it for a second before her hands go completely corporeal.

“...seriously?” Her face is scrunched up as if she thinks he’s trying to prank her, but Harry just shrugs. Magic isn’t so weird when you can see ghosts.

“Well,” she says, eyes scanning the page, “I’m both surprised, and disappointed. I mean, if wizards are a thing, you would think they would have better name for things. Mugwump? Sounds lame.”

Harry laughs.

—

There’s no way he can reply back to Hogwarts. Surrey doesn’t have owls, and he’s not even sure how he would catch one and convince it to fly to Hogwarts in the first place. And of course there’s nothing as simple as a mailing address on the envelope.

Harry tries wishing really hard for his reply to magically be sent, but that doesn't work either. None of the ghosts he knows have any ideas, although Jimmy does have some good stories of working in the post office.

Harry figures that either wizards are really dumb, not giving him any way to respond, or there's more coming and he'll figure it out later. Maybe both.

Death, on the other hand, has better ideas.

—

It's not that Death can't be on the mortal plane. By value of being Death, he is always there. But he finds most mortals and their lives boring, so he mostly doesn't bother. Even dear Harry only gets visits in dreams.

When he does appear in the flesh, he does so in the forms of animals. There's no point in trying to figure out a human form, with its cultural mores and complicated histories, when normally a hawk or a dog will do just as well.

So he settles himself down into the shape of a snowy owl and lets Harry tie his letter to one leg.

He teleports to Scotland, to the village just under the old magic school, and takes to the sky for the rest of the voyage. There are other owls in the winds, but they are smart enough to avoid him. Birds are good at sensing the predators in their midst.

Humans aren’t quite that clever.

—

Although the months leading up to September first are filled with owls and letters and home visits,
McGonagall rarely receives any mail aside from the few returning student’s concerns. There’s an automatic system in place for those who are accepting their spot as first years, and another one for the refusals.

It’s not unheard of that a muggleborn family will send last minute questions, but even then it’s rare enough that she feels her eyebrows rise at the sight of the stiff-necked owl sitting on her desk.

It’s a beautiful snowy bird, eyes sharp and piercing, and tied to its foot is a scrap of white muggle paper.

Dear Hogwarts,

I’m replying about my acceptance letter, but I have a few questions before I can give my reply. As far as I know my family isn’t magical, so there’s no one at home I can ask.

How much is tuition? I’m guessing it’s not publicly funded.
How and where does one buy the equipment on the list?
How do you get to the school.
What sort of curriculum is in place for non-magical studies.
Are there magical ghosts?
Can I bring my cat, Mimi, who is a ghost?

Thanks!
Harry Potter
Harry Potter is a strange child. Minerva would expect some sort of oddity of course—all wizards are—but not the kind that she sees sitting across from her in a too-clean kitchen. For one, he's sitting cross legged on his chair like he's on the ground, knees butted up against the table. He has an old, tattered book by one hand, spine cracked and bent, the cover almost worn enough to hide the picture of a dead body on it's cover. He looks rather dead himself, she can't help but think. Dark circles under his eyes and a pale complexion do him no wonders.

And then there's the cat.

Minerva likes cats, which is not a surprise to all who know her animagus shape. But she has never seen one with see-through fur and smoke at the edges of its paws. It does appear to be—well, a ghost. It is so strange to see one outside of the very old places of power like Hogwarts, and she doesn't think she's heard of there ever being any animal ghosts before. Normally you need to be a relatively powerful witch or wizard to stay after death, and even then, most of them are more spell or enchantment than actual spirit. If she didn’t know better she would think the cat to be some sort of patronus.

“How did you say you came upon this creature?” she asks again, as if the answer will change.

The boy doesn’t seem to mind the repeat questions, simply blinks slowly, not unlike a cat himself.

“She was in the garden. I’ll admit, I’m somewhat surprised you can see her, none of the Dursleys can,” he says, tapping on finger against the spine of his book. They both have cups of steaming tea but neither have touched them.

“Most muggles don’t have the ambient magic necessary to see such things,” she agrees, taking a note of the fact that Potter calls his family by their last name. Doesn’t seem to attached to them, although she can’t say she blames him.

“So all wizards can see ghosts?” he asks, finger still tapping.

She frowns.

“It is not common for ghosts to exist outside of areas with large magical cores. Old historic sites, schools—they might have a ghost or two that witches and wizards can see and interact with. You sometimes you will even get poltergeists. I haven’t heard of a ghost showing up in such a muggle centric area before.”

The boy hums thoughtfully, eyeing the curled up form of the cat. It appears to be askep, despite being dead.

“Well, I suppose I always knew Mimi was special,” he says slowly, “although I didn’t realise she was this special. Anyways, about the other things I mentioned in the letter.”
“Ah, yes. I was actually anticipating to talk to your guardians about that. They should have been informed about your vault and the Hogwarts fund,” Minerva says. In the long run the cat is the least of her concerns. It’s obvious some oversights have happened in regards to his situation.

“Vault? What kind of vault?” Potter asks, and she feels her headache grow.

—

So supposedly Harry is rich, which is nice, he supposes. He doesn’t really know, actually. Having money is good because it lets him eat and save up supplies for his sewing projects, but he’s not like Dudley who has to have the newest toy whenever it comes out.

He doesn’t really care about material things. A consequence of hanging out with Death all the time, maybe.

He has Mimi on his shoulders, purring over the noise of the alley, as he follows the sharp-dressed professor through the crowd. There’s a lot of fantastical sights to see, from colourful robes and hats to flying charms and strange things in windows. But he’s not paying much attention to any of it. He can feel the disinterest of Death at his back and the businesslike stride of McGonagall doesn’t leave him with much time to look around.

“Wizards always mess around with the nature of things,” Death says. He’s in the form of a scruffy British man with dark circles under his eyes and a sullen look to him, hands shoved into his pockets as he watches the people go by. He’s dressed in what the professor keeps calling muggle fashion, and there’s a slouch to him that makes him look a little too much like the teenagers who hang outside the school during lunch.

McGonagall can’t see him, so Harry hasn’t been able to ask him about the new form without looking weird. It’s a little annoying, if he’s honest.

“They live twice the age as other humans, you know? Magic sustains them past the natural age. If I was the kind of deity to take offense to such a thing, there would be some pretty bad consequences to it,” Death’s voice says from behind, and Harry has to stop himself from twitching and turning.

They’re heading towards a white stone building that towers over the others in the area, pushing through a slightly thicker crowd to ascend the steps and pass by some short creatures that look vaguely like extras in a Lord of the Rings stage play.

Harry keeps his face as straight as possible and just keeps following. They duck into a dimly lit space with long lines of pointy hats and long cloaks, and he can feel Death’s sigh from behind him.

“Of course, they all come to me in the end, so what does it matter that they have a few years more. It is the ones who think themselves above me completely that end up with the worse fates.” The words are pointed, but not really directed to Harry himself. He ignores it.

“We will be able to pick up enough coin here for you to pay for your supplies—and not too many frivolous purchases, I hope—but I would suggest you talk to your asset manager at some point to know the full extent of your account. There might be investments or funds that need attention,” McGonagall says, ushering Harry into one of the lines. There’s a dark look in her eyes, has been since the Dursley’s came home and started yelling about the witch in their home. Harry ignores that too.

“And you’re sure I don’t have to worry about tuition?” he asks, idly petting Mimi.

“The fund takes care of any orphans from the war, but even if it didn’t, you would have had a place
on the list and a subsidized acceptance because the Ministry doesn’t want to let uneducated magical
children become a danger, which is a real possibility.” Perhaps her voice is just a tad annoyed. Harry
might have pressed a little too much on asking why he would want to go to Hogwarts in the first
place.

Yeah, magic is cool and all, but also...Death has already told him the man who killed his parents is
still alive, and he’ll be away from all his friends if he has to live in Scotland for most of the year. He
knows the neighbourhood ghosts would tell him to go and get an education if he asked, but he can’t
help but want to cling to them a little. He only has so much time, and it’s not like he’ll be sticking
around as a ghost himself.

He pets Mimi a little harder and very carefully doesn’t think about what’s going to happen with her
once he’s dead and stuck in Death’s domain.

The line shortens slowly, witches and wizards either heading further into the building with those
small creatures following them. The creatures—goblins, maybe? The goblins look like they’re trying
to not seem like an obvious guard, but he’s not sure how anyone is buying that. They look vicious.

Eventually they get to the front, and McGonagall takes out a large golden key. She places it on the
teller’s desk and in a voice almost low enough to be a whisper she mutters something to the creature
on the other side.

They blink behind large gold rimmed glasses and then lean a little so they can see over the edge of
the tall desk. Harry tries to keep still and not blink as the judging eye looks him over.

“Very well, Griphook will take you. Next!”

Another goblin comes out from the back and beacons them forward. Harry lets McGonagall usher
him along, one eye on their guard and another on the tunnel they appear to be going down. There’s a
cart at the other end, and it opens up into what looks like a large, underground cavern with rails and
other carts speeding by too quick for him to see their riders.

“Now goblins, they understand death properly,” Death continues, grinning at the maze in front of
them. That more than anything makes Harry unwind enough to get into the cart. He makes sure to
place Mimi on his lap instead of his shoulders, though, and ignores their escort’s glare.

He thinks about asking some questions—about goblins, about the tunnels, about his vault—but it
turns out the ride is fast enough that he can’t talk even if he wants to. The G force is only slightly
cushioned by what he assumes is magic; it feels like his chest is being crushed under the weight of a
few hundred tons.

It’s the most fun he’s had in a while.

—

Wizards use gold, it turns out. It seems a little wasteful, if he’s honest, but he’s never been interested
in economics so he can’t really say why. There’s a part of him that thinks of dragon hordes and the
greed of man.

Maybe he’s been reading too many fantasy books.

Before they leave he makes sure to politely thank Griphook, who looks both surprised and
suspicious. Mimi twirls around his legs as he blinks at the sun outside the bank.

“Well,” McGonagall says primly, brushing off her suit, “that was as dreadful as always. We can buy
your supplies now, at least.”

“You’re not too busy?” he asks, following her back into the crowds. He had gotten the impression that she had better things to do than babysit one eleven-year-old.

“It would be irresponsible of me to leave you in a place you do not know, especially considering, well…” Her eyes twitch over to him, eyeing his forehead.

Harry rubs at the very faint scar there—Death’s contract on his skin—and frowns. Although McGonagall had explained the bare bones of how the Wizarding world views him, when it become obvious the Dursleys had told him nothing, it was not hard to guess there was a lot she had left unsaid. At least she seems immune to whatever fame the scar symbolizes, and has been careful to not bring too much attention to them as they wander the alley.

The first couple stops for supplies are quick but interesting. He’s read about a lot of magical societies in his quest to go through the whole fiction shelf at the local second hand store, but it’s one thing to read about it and another to live it. There’s a store for potions ingredients that smells vaguely like a bog and has strange things in jars and a crotchety man behind the counter. There’s a shop for books that Harry perhaps spends longer in than he really needs to, slipping in other purchases into their basket when McGonagall isn’t looking. There’s a shop for clothing, where Harry pretty much ignores the boy next to him so he can watch Mimi play with a basket of loose thread.

There’s a wand shop with a old man who looks like he wants to say something more about Harry and his supposed legacy, but is stopped by McGonagall’s glare. He kinda hopes he can grow up to be like her, if he’s honest. Would make things a lot easier.

Of course, he knows he’s not going to grow up at all, so it’s somewhat of a moot point.

—

Minerva watches Potter eye the storefronts and frowns. The strange ghost cat is back on his shoulders, draped like a scarf, but it is the odd politely amused expression on his face that she watches.

She has escorted more than a fair share of muggleborn children to the alley over the years, and although Harry isn’t necessarily muggleborn, he’s close enough considering his lack of knowledge. Normally there’s at least some amount of awe, or fear when confronted by how different the Wizarding world is. It’s one thing to be told about magic, and quite another to be confronted with it.

Potter has none of that. At most he’s looked mildly surprised by some of the sights. And although he’s asked plenty of questions, none of the answers seem to interest him much. There’s no kidlike wonder, no excitement. He’s a very placid child.

“Can we go in?” Potter asks, pointing to a shop and breaking her musings. She glances quickly and finds herself surprised by the displays of paper and ink. Although she’s tried not to have biases when meeting people, part of her had still expected him to be more interested in the Quidditch store. Most boys his age are, and well, he does look an awful lot like his father.

“Of course. You probably need some quills and a few rolls of parchment anyways.”

He nods, and with a quick glance at the slowly thinning crowd, darts into the shaded entryway. The inside of the shop smells like old books and the acrid bite of ink and magic. Minerva breathes in deeply and goes about picking up the requisite purchases while Potter browses. After the first few shops she’s learnt not to let the boy pick his supplies himself—otherwise he’ll spend twenty minutes
flipping through options before discarding all of them.

The shopkeeper recognises her, and Minerva has the vague notion she might have been a Hufflepuff during her time in Hogwarts, but she can’t remember her name. She smiles instead, and deposits the small bundle of parchment and quills on the desk while she turns to keep an eye on the boy.

There’s a selection of leather bound books and ever-inking pens that he’s currently thumbing through, his ghost-cat an ever present shadow at his side, and she sighs slightly. There’s the sound of a throat clearing and Minerva turns slightly to catch the shopkeep’s eye.

“They look younger every year, don’t they?” the witch says with a knowing eye, wand lazily floating through the air as the boy’s supplies are wrapped in paper and tied up, smaller than they rightfully should be.

Minerva smiles and agrees. There’s a few moments of small talk before another customer pulls the witch’s attention away and her attention drifts again.

The boy’s family had been horrid, as expected, but there had been no real sign of anything dire enough to warrant this subdude behaviour. It didn’t feel forced, however, and just based off of the scant few minutes she was in that house before her better sense told her to leave with Potter and only come back once he had his supplies and her calm back, she didn’t feel like he was afraid with them. He acted just as uncaring and lackadaisical with his aunt spewing filth at him.

It bothers her, however. And she can’t help think that it’s likely to bother others even more. He’s almost definitely not what most people expect when they think of their saviour.

Her lips twist a little.

Maybe that’s for the better.

There’s a slight pressure against her leg as the ghost-cat rubs against them, twining around one to sit down beside her. She raises an eye and then looks up as Potter makes his way to the front of the store. He has a few items in his hands, but she’s glad to see he hasn’t gone too far in spending yet. Not like at the bookstore.

“Well?” she asks, shifting her posture so she can take him in more clearly over the shelf that runs down the centre of the room.

“I’m good,” he says with a smile. “You said there was only the trunk to get next, right?”

“That is correct, and a lunch couldn’t go amiss either, I suppose,” she says as she pulls her sleeve up to look at her watch. It’s about that time, and she hadn’t been able to stop to get breakfast during all the chaos of the morning.

Potter finishes paying for his purchases and she watches as he handles the shrunken packages with care.

“I had been meaning to ask,” she starts as they make their way out of the shop and towards where she remembers the trunk shop is, “if your relatives kept you completely ignorant as to the Wizarding world, how were you able to send an owl to Hogwarts?”

Potter hums, idly scratching the ghost-cat under its chin.

“Oh, that? He’s a ghost too. I bribed him to take it. Didn’t think it would work at first, actually.”
Minerva feels her brow arch and takes another look at the cat. As far as she knows, even if animals can become ghosts, they for sure shouldn’t be capable of carrying letters or, now that she thinks of it, touch the living. That’s for the realm of poltergeists.

She purses her lips.

What was it that Ollivander said again? Destined for great things?

She has a strange feeling in her gut about all of this.

—

At some point between buying the last of his supplies and sitting awkwardly in a booth as McGonagall ordered the both of them lunch, Death has changed from a sullen teenager to the more familiar form of Lily Evans.

“She was always Lily’s favourite teacher, you know,” Death says, sipping on tea that no one’s seemed to notice going missing. Harry hums.

“Strict, but fair. And not as lawful as you would think, underneath it all,” she continues, legs crossed and looking nothing short of your average witch enjoying afternoon tea. If you ignore that her shadow stretches out into the shape of some sort of horned monstrosity.

Harry brings Mimi up and rubs her belly with his face to hide his mouth from anyone looking in.

“I knew I shouldn’t have introduced you to Dungeons and Dragons. You know the alignment system doesn’t work in a real life setting,” he mutters, Mimi’s fur dampening any sound from actually escaping. Death hears him anyways, of course.

“I don’t know,” she muses, “it simplifies things so nicely, and just because it’s not accurate doesn’t mean it’s not true. Or something like that. Dichotomies and such.”

Harry just shakes his head and puts Mimi down, in time to catch McGonagall’s raised eye. He grins slightly and shrugs, picking up a glass of what he was told was “butterbeer”. Supposedly it doesn’t actually have any alcohol in it, or at least the Wizarding world doesn’t care much about underage drinking.

“I figured I would inform you about the Hogwarts Express while we still had time, since I doubt your relatives would have the necessary information. The entrance to it is hidden between platform nine and ten, suitably named platform nine and three quarters. You have to just run through the brick —completely safe, I assure you,” she says after a moment.

Harry nods and tucks that into his steadily growing mental notebook about the Wizarding world.

“Now, the train will leave with or without you, so I suggest you arrive on time. One you arrive, there will be someone there to usher you to the castle, where you will then be sorted into your house. I did explain the houses, correct?”

Harry nods again, and doesn’t voice his own opinion on the tradition. Death isn’t so polite.

“Ah yes, segregate children based off of completely arbitrary traits and watch as they fight it out amongst themselves. Why, they even award prizes and points! It’s all very Lord of the Flies, don’t you agree?”

Harry doesn’t answer.
“Now, you are allowed one pet while studying at Hogwarts, and since—Mimi is it?—Mimi isn’t quite your normal cat, I would suggest you keep quiet about her nature until you settle in. Do you have any questions?”

Harry cocks his head a little, eyes following where he can see a server with a few floating trays make their way towards them.

“Actually…”

—

Harry spends the next week ignoring his relatives and saying goodbye to his ghosts. The new one—the upperclassman—thinks that everything he says about the Wizarding world sounds ridiculous, and they have fun making more and more outrageous theories as to which fantasy novel cliche will turn up next. Her name is Alison and she’s read almost as many as he has.

He spends his last bit of money on buying new books from the second hand store as well as some new pens, and splurges on a set of dice. He’s never been able to get his own set, not that any of the kids at school would want to play with him considering Dudley. He has a feeling he won’t have that issue at Hogwarts.

He doesn’t need to worry about saving for food anymore, not while he’s rich in the Wizarding world.

Jimmy and Isabella seem genuinely sad to see him pack his bags, although that might be because he’s the only one still interested in hearing their stories. But they have Alison now, and since she’s still trying to get a hang of being dead, she needs the mentorship.

He makes sure to say goodbye to the flowers in the Dursley’s garden, as well as the nest of grass snakes that live behind the shed. He packs what few personal items he actually has—mostly beaten-up books and a mismatched sewing kit. He leaves the rest behind and doesn’t feel bad about it. The cupboard with its spider webs and cramped shelves, Dudley’s broken toys and last year’s preserves. There’s nothing there for him.

He says goodbye to Miss Figg and sells her a few of the cat toys he’d been making. He doesn’t bother doing anything with the other half-finished projects, although he brings his few finished blankets.

And then it’s the morning of September first, and he’s dragging his trunk into a cab to go to London and Charing Cross. The Dursleys seem willing to pretend they don’t see him leave, and he’s quite happy to keep it that way.

Death follows him, of course. Death follows him everywhere.

—

Harry steps onto the train with a mist-tipped cat draped around his shoulders and trunk full of fantasy novels. He doesn’t meet a family of redheads on the platform, although he does notice the twins and their loud laughter. He passes a girl with frizzy hair on the steps, who doesn’t seem to notice as she bumps into him. He watches as she hurries down the aisle before she walks straight into a boy who’s walking out of one of the doors. Both of them go down in a tangle of limbs.

There’s a few muttered curses and yelps, and then the faint cry of “Trevor!” before he walks away.

He settles in an unoccupied compartment and watches the crowd from the window. Mimi is a warm
presence on his lap and he has a book with a cracked spine in his hands.

Death sits across from him, dressed in Lily Evan’s skin, and watches him as a cough overtakes him. Harry wipes a bit of blood away from his lips and smiles, a little. The circles under his eyes are the colour of fresh bruises, and he feels a little like one too.

“How long?”

She cocks her head, eyeing him. The hot pulse of his life a fragile thing in her hands. His mother’s lifespan ticking down, an hourglass with a set time. She doesn’t answer—doesn’t have the time to, really, before a boy in disheveled clothing stumbles through the door.

“Sorry, sorry, all the other compartments are full. Can I sit here?”

—

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!