Evil as Plain as the Scar on His Face

by Wandering_Mind_95

Summary

Dumbledore showed no reaction, his demeanor as calm as when Harry first entered. “You are not the first nor will you be the last to be fooled by Tom Riddle.”

He was wrong. He wasn’t just fooled by the memory. He had been thoroughly defeated in every sense of the word. How did he not see that?

“He branded me!! I'll never be free!” he cried out. The mark on his neck a constant reminder of his failures, of his defeat. A mark more meaningful than the scar on his forehead.

The worst betrayals come from those you least expect, Harry finds this out the hard way as he’s left picking up the pieces after a disastrous second year. Tom Riddle always enjoyed breaking things. Harry Potter was his and he'd make sure everyone knew this.

“You are mine, Harry Potter.” Harry shuddered at the parting words of his enemy, whispered into his ear, warm breath tickling his skin. It wasn’t a promise, it was a fact.
Chapter 1

It was September 1, 1992, and Harry James Potter was just stepping out of his taxi at King's Cross Station, the cabbie helping him with his trunk. Harry was entering his Second Year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. After an uneventful summer, he was looking forward to returning to his world, the world of magic. Growing up over the past decade in the Muggle World, it just felt wrong living at the orphanage now. Being at Hogwarts felt right, like he belonged there, like he was home. While Hogwarts wasn't perfect, it felt knew he belonged there more than he belonged at the orphanage and he knew without a doubt he belonged there more than he had ever belonged at the Dursley's.

Shaking those memories out of his mind, Harry focused on the upcoming school year and the excitement that was sure to come.

Giving the cabbie a tip, he shouldered his knapsack and began pulling his trunk behind him, looking for Platform's 9 and 10. It was Tuesday just before 10 so there wasn't too many people, the work day having started a few hours before. So if he started running at the entrance to Platform 9 ¾ it would look extremely suspicious. Instead, he made his way over, leaning back against the wall casually, waiting for the magic to recognize him and let him through.

Confusion filled him as nothing happened. Pushing a little harder, still, nothing happened.

What was going on? The platform couldn't be closed so why couldn't he enter?

Looking around, the messy haired boy resigned himself to waiting for a family to come and help him. Sliding down the barrier, Harry pulled out his journal, not having had time this morning to write anything down. There was a lot to write about. The orphanage had been in a flurry of activity the past fortnight. The staff had informed the children that they had ten months to find them new homes, be it permanent ones or foster homes or just to another orphanage. Harry had known it was only a matter of time, a wave of deinstitutionalization was sweeping the nation. People were horrified learning about the life they lived and wanted to be seen taking a stance for the 'poor children'. Personally, Harry found it disgusting. It was these same people who refused to give the orphanage money to actually take care of the kids, the same ones who hurried along a little faster when they saw one of them.

Where was the outrage when his uncle was able to drop him off, no questions asked?

Where was the outrage when he went to school for a week with a broken arm before anyone noticed and said anything?

No, Harry knew he didn't belong in this world. If he had been in the wizarding world, none of this would've happen. No one would overlook something so severe, of that he was sure.

Dot, the head caretaker, promised that they were going to work on his case while he was away at school. Secretly, he was hoping the Headmaster would let him stay over the summers until he graduated as he literally would have nowhere else to go and if he was put in a foster home, it'd be harder to hide his magic from them as he couldn't exactly go around telling every foster house he'd have that he was a wizard!

Dammit, school hasn't even started and he's already stressing over this! He'd already spent the past fortnight going over how to approach the Headmaster about his request and the anxiety was still clawing at him. What if the Headmaster denied his request?
The hooting of an owl drew his attention. Bingo! A wizarding family of five was approaching the barrier. Moving to the side, Harry watched blankly as the father went first with his daughter, who appeared to be a first-year. The clattering of metal confirmed his theory: the barrier was blocked.

"What's going on da? Why can't we go through?" the brown haired girl asked, most likely never having experienced this before.

The husband turned to his wife, anxiousness written across his face, "Something's blocking the barrier."

She looked worriedly at the barrier, "Should we contact the Ministry?"

They would start to draw attention if they stayed there any longer. Three kids with odd-looking trunks and a caged owl didn't scream muggle.

"Ah! No need," the father motioned to another group entering the platform. "Felix should be able to take a look."

Their little group grew by four and Harry was anxious to get through to the Hogwarts Express.

Skipping the pleasantries, Harry observed as the adults seemed to get right down to business. From what he could hear, this Felix person worked for the Ministry in the Warding Department.

Noting that in his notebook – Harry promised to look more into it later – he narrowed his eyes as he saw the first man discretely wave his wand around the group while Felix stepped closer to the barrier. It appeared the group had either yet to notice Harry or were ignoring him as the man didn't even spare him a glance. Harry had to stop his hand moving to flatten his hair over his scar. The black crow's nest had grown a few inches so his bangs could cover his scar completely. But it was a force of habit picked up at the Dursleys and carried over when witches and wizards would ogle his scar.

Felix waved his wand, mumbling a few incantations under his breath and tapped the bricks. Humming, he stepped back. "It has been tampered with. Someone activated the emergency wards that bar both the entrance and exit for the platform. I reset it but Chris and I should go in first, make sure nothing else was tampered with."

"Mum, why are there emergency wards on the platform?" It was the little girl speaking, her inquiry's making her a sure put for Ravenclaw, Harry thought. Not that there was anything wrong with that, Harry being one himself. She had shifted from her father's side to her mother's, most likely concluding it to be the safest place.

Her mother patted her hair as the two men entered Platform 9 ¾ with wands raised. "During the war, the Ministry placed wards around the platform in case there was an attack so people had a safe place to go."

One of the older boys scoffed at that logic, "So then you'd be sitting ducks during an attack."

"Nicolas!" A quick reprimand from his mother silenced any retort his brother had it seemed. Harry watched their interaction in interest. It always fascinated him to observe family dynamic and made him think of what his own would've been like had his parents not been killed.

An awkward silence took over the two families as they waited for the men to return. Only a few minutes elapsed before they were appearing in front of the barrier again, giving the all clear.

"There was no sign of anyone but I sent word to the Ministry to send a team of Aurors to take a look."
Harry quickly put his notebook away after scribbling down – *aurors?* – and followed closely behind the last person. He didn't want those wards suddenly closing on him again.

Smoke filled the air as he finally made it to Platform 9 ¾ and he greedily took in the sight of the scarlet train. He was going home.

/ 

Being one of the first people on the train had its advantages: He had the pick of the carriages. He chose one close to the front that way a majority of people wouldn't keep walking by to ogle him. He had gotten lucky last year as no one knew him but this year that anonymity was gone.

Pulling out his most recent book, *1001 Every Day Charms*, from his knapsack and gripping his wand, he relished in actually being able to perform magic. He had felt naked all summer, unable to use his magic. The downside of living in an orphanage, other than the obvious, was that he rarely had time alone. Someone was always nearby and while Dot and the others were okay, he really couldn't stand being around them for long periods of time.

A knock broke his concentration.

Looking up, Harry noticed a nervous looking red-haired girl in the doorway. He raised an eyebrow at her fidgety figure.

"Um, everywhere else is full. Do you mind?" she managed to squeak out, probably half expecting him to turn her away.

Must be a first-year, Harry thought in fondness. He remembered his first train ride last year. He motioned to the seat across from him in an invitation. A wave of relief took over her face as she dragged her trunk behind her.

"My brothers were supposed to help me but ran off the moment we boarded." She sighed as he helped her stow her trunk. "I'm Ginny, by the way, Ginny Weasley." She pushed her hair back as she introduced herself, her nervousness from before quickly fading.

Harry could see the resemblance to his year mate, Ron. If he was the brother she was talking about, he could wholeheartedly believe that he ran off without helping her. He didn't have a very good reputation.

"Those are crappy brothers," he stuck his hand out to shake hers, "I'm Harry."

Ginny smiled at him and Harry couldn't help noticing all the freckles adorning her face. They suited her.

"So what house do you think you'll be in? Gryffindor like your brothers?" his voice inquiring, as they started small talk.

A smile broke out, pride shining in her eyes, "That's what I'm aiming for! It's a family tradition."

Harry wondered what house his parents had been in. Were they in Ravenclaw or Gryffindor? Were they even in the same house?

"What about you?" her voice broke him out of his musing.

"Hmm? I'm in Ravenclaw?" he half-smiled, holding up his book like that explained everything.
Her laughter filled the compartment. Harry looked at her in confusion, what had he said?

She giggled, "It's nothing; I just, I wouldn't picture you a Ravenclaw."

Harry huffed in faux indignation, "Well, I can already tell you're a Gryffindor."

They fell into a comfortable conversation flow, each trading stories, becoming more and more comfortable with the other.

It grew dark and that meant they were getting closer to the castle. It also meant Ginny's nerves began to grow. Harry tried to reassure her that it was nothing to worry about, remembering his own reservations last year.

"You'll go up there and the Sorting Hat will barely touch your head before it declares you a Gryffindor."

Ginny sent him a weak smile, knowing he was trying to help calm her. Surprisingly, it helped. She had all these expectations from her family because of her brothers that she was worried about messing up. But with Harry, he didn't know her family or her brothers. He just saw her, Ginny. To be honest, it was refreshing to step out of her brother's shadows and be seen as herself.

Ginny moved to exit the compartment before pausing, "We're friends, right? You'll still talk to me after I'm sorted?"

Harry felt his stomach roll. He hadn't really had a friend at Hogwarts. His dorm-mates were more of acquaintances than actual friends. Biting his lip, he couldn't keep the smile off his face, "Find me at lunch tomorrow?"

Ginny turned her back to him to hide her blush, happiness filling her at his response.

Harry exited the train feeling better and better about this year. He'd made a friend.

/  

Just like he predicted, Ginny was sorted into Gryffindor with the hat barely touching her head. She threw a bright smile his way as she raced to her older brothers who congratulated her. The girl from the platform had also gone into Ravenclaw just like he had predicted.

With a few words of greeting from Professor Dumbledore, the feast appeared on the tables and famished, Harry began to dig in.

"How was your summer Harry?" a voice to the left grabbed his attention. It was Padma Patil.

Smiling, he put his silverware down and finished chewing. "It was okay. Mainly roamed around London and Diagon Alley when I could." He noticed some of the others listening in. "It was an adjustment after being here all school year."

"I know the feeling. I didn't think it'd be weird spending 27/7 with Parvarti again but it was an adjustment. I mean we see each other every day here but it's different being home." Padma tried to explain. Her twin and she were the best of friends but they had both grown last year. They had different groups of friends and found different interests. They had to relearn each other over the summer.

This opened the conversation up for the other second years.
"Me mum was hovering all summer! You'd think I was dying the way she was acting!" Terry Boot grumbled, stabbing his roast.

Anthony Goldstein leaned into Harry, to explain away some of his confusion, "Terry's the youngest of three. So he's the last to attend Hogwarts. His mum don't like to think that he's growing up."

Harry didn't understand but then again, he didn't have a mum so maybe that was normal for parents.

"Did you do anything over the summer?"

Anthony shared an excited smile with Harry, "I actually visited some relatives in the States. That's a strange place, let me tell you."

"Do they have a school like Hogwarts?" He hadn't read anything about magic in the United States or any other country for that matter. Did every country have a school like Hogwarts or were they different? Was the magic different?

Another voice cut into their conversation, "Ilvermorny School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

It was Morag MacDougal. Harry wasn't sure he had ever heard her speak before. She usually kept to herself or stuck close to Mandy Brocklehurst.

The conversation that took over was in-depth and informative as they discussed their summer assignments and what they thought about the curriculum this year. Harry mainly listened, chiming in from time to time but mostly he found his gaze wandering to Ginny over at the Gryffindor table. Her gaze met his and they shared a smile before he noticed the person next to her nudged her side. Harry watched as they exchanged a few words and Ginny's wide, horrified eyes met his before averting them to her plate, red staining her face.

Harry frowned, already guessing what had happened. It was the reason he hadn't given his last name. No one could treat him normally once they found out he was Harry Potter.

He started poking around dejectedly at his food, wondering if Ginny would treat him the same now that she knew who he was.

/ 

His class schedule furthered dampened his mood the next morning: History of Magic in the morning and double Potions in the afternoon. He had hoped he could put off seeing the Potion's Professor for a few more days. It was like the forces out there couldn't see him happy for a single day. Not even the mouth-watering smells of breakfast could lift his mood after Professor Flitwick handed him his schedule.

A similar sentiment was heard amongst the second year Ravenclaws when they examined their schedule.

"Professor Binns and Professor Snape in the same day!" Terry moaned into his arms, nearly dumping his goblet of pumpkin juice.

Anthony and Padma were more subtle in their displeasure. At least he wasn't the only one dreading today.

Disregarding the obvious, Harry could tell this year was going to be good. With the awkwardness of last year gone, Harry felt himself falling right in with his housemates. Finding conversations
more and more open for him and understanding the wizarding references a lot better. He wasn't afraid to join in in the nightly discussions the boys had before bed and they weren't afraid to explain anything he didn't understand. That was the hard part of last year, being the only one not raised or having any knowledge of the magical world. Already feeling uncomfortable with everyone knowing who he was, things were only made worse when he had no idea what the boys were talking about. So he just kept his head down and learned as much as he could last year. This year was going to be different, he promised himself.

At the orphanage, there weren't really such things as friends. You never knew who would leave and when. Better not to get too attached. School wasn't any better. It was a pretty nice public school they went to in London but the kids knew who they were and made it known in how they interacted with them. They couldn't participate in school activities or clubs because they didn't have the money and no one wanted to be friends with Freaky Harry who always had weird things happening around him.

Here, after last year, he was hoping people would begin to treat him like any other student. It seemed to calm down after a few months but there were still a few persistent kids. Living with the other boys all last year, it was obvious to them he was nothing special, that he was just like them so they didn't treat him any different. Around his housemates, he found himself in study groups occasionally mingling with Hufflepuffs. He could tell Professor Flitwick was proud when he asked Padma to be his partner in Charms instead of working by himself. The same with Professor McGonagall.

Despite his promise, more often than not, he found himself seeking out solitude. Living in the castle could feel claustrophobic at times with so many children in corridors, in rooms, in the Great Hall. Being alone allowed him to clear his head, to satisfy his curiosity. His exploration of the castle last year left him with more questions than answers. His trusted cloak helped him there. The only possession he owed that connected him to his parents. After receiving it as a Christmas present last year from an anonymous source, Harry had put it to good use in his nightly wanderings.

The Weasley Twins still managed to find him under his Invisibility Cloak. He had to be more careful on his little nightly strolls. There had been a few close calls where they had almost got him caught by Filch. He didn't trust them but at the same time, they hadn't said anything about his cloak which he was sure they were suspicious of. He would much rather avoid them all together, thank you very much.

It was the third weekend of September and Harry was outside, like a majority of his classmates, enjoying the mild weather. His books were neatly tucked into his knapsack, having only recently completed his Charms essay on the wand movement and uses of Lumos and how to increase the power of the spell. He had found it easy to drop back into this familiar routine.

His relaxing afternoon came to an abrupt conclusion when he found himself being rudely dragged away from the practice snitch his eyes had been following for the past five minutes.

A voice roughly demanded of him before he could get his barring's straight, "That snitch, you were following it?" There was a hint of giddiness in the voice.

Squeezing his eyes to stop the spinning, Harry tried to form words, "Wha-? Um...yeah, it's not that hard."

That was apparently the wrong thing to say as instead of being left alone under his tree, Harry found himself being dragged to the Quidditch Pitch. "Have you ever played Quidditch? Do you have a broom? You do have a seeker's build." The boy dragging him continued on, speaking at
Harry, not giving him time to answer any of his multitude of questions.

Who was this guy? Seriously? Who just kidnaps a kid relaxing, minding his own business?

"Here," a broom was thrust into his hands, "I want you to fly to the center of the pitch while I release the Snitch. Catch it as fast as you can."

"Who...um...who exactly are you?" Harry asked, unsurely.

"Derrick Hopkins, seventh-year Quidditch Captain. Now I want you to do exactly as I said." The now identified Derrick, demanded with no room for objections.

For some reason, Harry found himself obeying the older student. His 180 cm stature easily dwarfed him and he had a tone that made Harry feel like if he said jump he should ask how high. Gripping the well-worn wooden handle, Harry felt free as he lifted up off the ground. Sure he had flown last year with the rest of the first years but he had rarely been able to go flying freely after that.

Doing a few loops and turns, the bespectacled boy readied himself for the snitch. It shouldn't be too hard. He had been able to follow it during last year's games.

Derrick released the snitch and, waiting for his go-ahead, Harry raced.

The wind rushing through his hair and the weightlessness of flying amplified his adrenaline rush. He could stay up here forever as he tracked the tiny golden ball. He lost it for a second as it took a sudden plunge but he was right on it not a moment later. This was the most fun he had had in a long time!

They were getting closer to the ground when the snitch made another sharp turn but Harry was right on it and pulling up from the dive, he cut off its escape with a tight grip around the fluttering wings.

The windburn wasn't even noticeable on his face as his facial muscle felt like they were stuck in the largest smile he had ever worn.

Disembarking from his borrowed broom, he found himself rushing to Derrick with the golden ball firmly clutched in his right hand and the broomstick in his left.

"That was...That was amazing!" the excitement was so obvious in his voice, he couldn't contain himself.

When he got close enough to Derrick to see his reaction, he wasn't disappointed. If possible, an even bigger smile was on the seventh-year's face. "Congratulations! You're Ravenclaw's new seeker!"

The ground felt slightly harder, his feet barely making the next step on the soft green grass. He had not been expecting that.

"But I-I don't have a broom! I've never even played Quidditch before!"

Derrick wasn't taking any excuses though. He wanted Harry on his team. No, he needed Harry on his team.

"I'll speak with Professor Flitwick about a broom and as for never playing...you'll learn. Practice is this Saturday at seven o'clock."
This year was definitely turning out better than last year already. With a smile still adorning his face, Harry followed Derrick to the training rooms where he would find his training gear on Saturday.

"Come on, I'll introduce you to some of the team." Harry was really starting to like Derrick. In the two hours he had known him, he hadn't said anything about who he was, didn't try to make him feel inferior, and he put him on the team!

He still couldn't believe it!

"Emily and Ryan are doing an assignment for Care of Magical Creatures right now. They're seventh-years. Emily is a chaser, like me, while Ryan is our keeper. Davies is probably in the library. He's a fourth-year and our last chaser. Finally, Duncan and Samuels are our beaters. Samuels is a sixth-year and Duncan is a fifth-year."

Going over the names, Harry realized minus Davies and himself, this was the same team as last year. He voiced his observation to Derrick.

"Those two graduated last year and this is the best team we've got. Gryffindor has a good team but since Charlie Weasley left, they haven't had a decent seeker. Diggory is one of the best players on Hufflepuff; he's their seeker."

There was a house missing, "And Slytherin?"

Derrick glanced at him, eyebrow raised, as if he really needed to answer that question. "Slytherin has a good team but they lost Higgs last year. It's not talent you need to look out for with them."

And Harry understood what was left unsaid. From what he remembered of the team last year, Slytherin liked to play dirty.

He felt Derrick pause in their walk to the Great Hall. "Actually, go sit with your friends, I see Professor Flitwick leaving. The sooner I can talk to him the quicker we can get you a broom." The seventh-year took off to intercept their head of house but turned around for one last word, "Remember Potter, Saturday at 7."

Still not believing what happened, Harry sat himself down next to Michael Corner and Terry, who immediately started interrogating him.

"Was that Derrick Hopkins you were with? Prefect and Quidditch Captain, Derrick Hopkins?!"

Spooning a handful of grapes onto his plate and grabbing a few sandwiches, Harry let the anticipation build.

"Well?! Why were you with him?" Impatient faces flooded his vision as he bit into a grape.

Deciding he had let the anticipation build long enough, Harry gave them what they wanted, "Apparently I'm the new Ravenclaw Seeker."

"WHAT?!" A few heads turned their way at the exclamations. Seeing it was only a group of second-years, everyone went back to their own conversations.

"Ssshhhh!" Harry tried to keep them quiet.

"Do you know how amazing that is?! Second-years rarely make the House Quidditch Team."
For the first time, Harry didn't mind being the center of attention of their group. He told them all about his flying and how he caught the Snitch. He bashfully brushed it off as nothing as the boys stared at him in amazement. There was a buzz in the hall as they fell into a discussion about Quidditch, the conversation interesting enough to bring input from older years sitting nearby.

The ceiling reflected the general mood: a bright sun with minimal cloud coverage.

From his position at the Head Table, Dumbledore felt a smile take over his face and a twinkle enter his eyes as he observed the normally subdued savior interacting animatedly with his year mates.

"From what I hear, Ravenclaw has found themselves a new Seeker. His father would be proud."

The aged witch next to him held back a scowl. She had wanted the boy to be in her house and now his Quidditch skills were going to another team.

"Now now dear Professor McGonagall, is that jealousy I sense?"

"Gryffindor needs a Seeker." She bit out, no real venom behind her words.

Her disappointment and bitterness were evident as her eyes strayed from her lions to the little eagles.

"Ahh, and young Mr. Potter would've been the perfect fit for your team." Dumbledore nodded knowingly. He knew how passionate his Transfiguration professor was about Quidditch. "I imagine Mr. Wood would've loved to have a talent such as Mr. Potter's. If I may be so bold… perhaps Mr. Hopkins is better suited to take him under his wing?"

Tearing her gaze from the students, McGonagall leveled Dumbledore with a stern look, "You know I had hoped Mr. Potter would be one of my lions, but I only want what's best for him."

They both turned to observe the subject of their conversation. Harry was laughing at something one of the kids had said, immersed in the conversation, unlike last year where he was rarely seen even sitting with his year mates.

Perhaps Quidditch would do some good for the young Mr. Potter.

"Hmmm," Dumbledore hummed thoughtfully, "Has Mr. Potter been to the Trophy Room."

Together the two hatched a plan involving the unsuspecting eagle.

Harry had quickly become one of the favorites on the Quidditch team. Derrick became a sort of mentor for Harry. When they were practicing, he would go over strategy with him and how to better his game. He also let him hang around his group of friends. It was rather weird at first, them being 17 and 18, but Harry didn't mind all that much, especially when they would help him with Potions. No one could understand why Snape hated him so much, especially when they would help him with Potions. No one could understand why Snape hated him so much, so between his teammates – to make sure the man couldn't give the second year another detention similar to the one he assigned during a practice – they swore to help him pass Potions.

Soon they were hitting the end of October and Harry honestly didn't know where the time went. Life was good. He was home.

Halloween was only a few days away and there was a cheer in the air that he just couldn't replicate.
The closer the 31st got, the more the anticipation built. It had been like this last year too. It was this day that he felt the loss of his parents the greatest. Why did they give their life for him? Why did he survive? Would they be proud of him?

It was with luck that October 31st fell on a Saturday and Derrick had decided to keep the practice short that morning. As they left the changing rooms, Emily stopped to give him a small, understanding smile as the others patted him on the shoulder. They knew their young seeker was hurting today and they knew there wasn't anything they could do to stop the hurt. The best they could do was give him their support.

He needed a quiet place, somewhere lacking student traffic. The best place was the library as most of the students were outside or in the Great Hall enjoying the festivities of the holiday and the weekend. He just couldn't find it in himself to celebrate with the school. He had tried last year and it had been miserable. This year he figured he'd spend it alone, just wandering the castle. Terry and Padma had promised to bring some treats back with them after the feast; they didn't want him to completely miss out on the celebration.

He smiled as he thought about them, his friends. It was pretty amazing the difference between this year and last.

He was roaming the edge of the Restricted Section, hand skimming the worn and used book spines when he heard it: "...rip...tear...kill..."

It was a faint voice, a voice that seemed to freeze his soul, a voice of ice-cold venom. His fingers stilled in their movement across the spine of *Magical Diseases: Vol 3*

"...soo hungry....for soo long..."

The voice was getting closer! Harry slammed his leg into the bookcase in his rush to move. His heart rate quickened as he rushed from the library, paying no mind to Madam Pince's yelling about running in her library, no, he had to move. It was a primordial survival instinct that was screaming at him: if he stopped, he'd die!

"...let me rip you...let me tear you...let me kill you...kill...time to kill..."

Harry was up the staircase to the second-floor, chest heaving as he looked around wildly, his glasses slipping down his nose. Where was it?! Where did the voice go?

"...blood...I SMELL BLOOD!"

Harry jumped; the voice was right on top of him! But how? He was the only one in the corridor!

Gathering his courage, the Ravenclaw pulled out his wand, thankful he had remembered to grab it from his study table before his perusal of the bookcases.

"Who are you?" Harry shouted, voice cracking, as he crept down the corridor. "Where are you?"

Silence answered his questions.

"Yes, a murderer would take the time to answer your questions. Use your brain, Potter!" he muttered to himself sarcastically before berating himself.

He'd almost reached the end of the corridor and instead of turning back like any sane person would, he called out a warning.
"Whatever you've done…you won't get away with it. Professor Dumbledore will catch you!"

His wand was gripped tightly in his hand as he pushed his back into the wall, willing his courage not to fail him as he filled his lungs with shaky breaths.

Deep breath…don't do it, do not do it Potter. Harry was fighting an internal battle with himself. He had come this far, one part argued, so go all the way and turn the corner. The other, more rational side, argued back that he didn't know who or what was on the other side and he could be walking to his death.

His determination was too strong; he turned the corner and stopped in his tracks. There, on the wall, shimmering in the light of twin torches, were haunting words. Heart rate now pounding in his chest, threatening to beat right out of his body, hair standing up on his arms and neck, Harry approached the wall. His eyes were glued to the words, convinced the closer he got that they were written in blood.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPEN, ENEMIES OF THE HEIR BEWARE.

A plethora of thoughts bombarded his scrambled mind: What was the Chamber of Secrets? What heir? And who were its enemies?

His mind didn't have long to think about these questions as his eyes rested on the large shadow hanging behind one of the torches. He eyed the puddle of water on the floor as he neared the wall.

"Bloody-!" Harry cut himself off in shock. This wasn't good, this wasn't good at all. It was Mrs. Norris, the caretaker's cat! She was dead.

It took a moment for his mind to process what his body should be doing. He needed to get out of here and alert someone. If he was found here, at the scene, he knew it would look bad. He had his fair share of wrong-place-wrong-time run-ins at the orphanage.

But it was too late. He had only taken a few steps back when the sound of a hundred feet climbing the staircases assaulted his ears. He stood in the middle of the corridor as silence fell among the mass of students as they spotted the words and the cat.

The lone Ravenclaw darted his eyes from face to face, looking for anyone familiar, anyone who could save him from what was to happen next. There were none.

"Enemies of the Heir, beware?" A gleeful, vicious voice cut through the silence, "You'll be next, Mudbloods!"

It was Draco Malfoy. His eyes alive and face flushed in what Harry could only describe as giddiness. Honestly, based on reactions, Harry felt like they should change places.

Accusatory looks were thrown his way at the declaration, as if he had spoken and not the Slytherin. He tried to back up, put more distance between him and the cat but it didn't lessen the glares, the fear he could feel from the students. He could see some movement from the crowd like someone was pushing their way through but another voice took his attention.

"What's going on here? What's going on?"

Argus Filch came, pushing students out of his way to get to the front of the crowd. When his gaze landed on his precious cat, he fell back, clutching his face in horror.

"My cat! Mrs. Norris! What's happened to Mrs. Norris?" Harry and everyone else could hear the
pain in his voice. Everyone knew how much he loved his cat. His dull, popping eyes landed on the sole student next to his cat. "You! You killed my cat! I kill you!"

He advanced on Harry, not caring to ask any questions, already convinced of the student's guilt.

Harry backed up, not liking the look in the caretaker's eyes. But he knew he had nowhere to go.

The crowd seemed to part again as a figure came shoving out, racing towards Harry until it stood, blocking access to the second-year.

It was Derrick!

"I'd think carefully before attacking a student, Mr. Filch." Harry had never heard Derrick use that tone before and suddenly he had a new respect for his Quidditch Captain.

There was tension that hung over the corridor and everyone held their breath to see what would happen next.

"Thank you, Mr. Hopkins, for coming to the defense of your fellow student." Dumbledore swept past the three to Mrs. Norris, quickly detaching her from the torch. A number of teachers had followed the Headmaster and Harry saw a few of them give him curious looks. He stared right back at Snape when the Potion's professor refused to move his gaze. Harry knew the man was suspicious of him, he was always suspicious of him.

"Come with me Argus," Professor Dumbledore said to Filch with a reprimand in his voice that surprised Harry. "You too, Mr. Potter, Mr. Hopkins."

Still looking at Snape, Harry was startled at Dumbledore's request for Derrick to come with them.

"Sir –," he went to protest before he was interrupted by his second least favorite professor.

Lockhart stepped forward, Harry would say, too eagerly.

"My office is nearest, Headmaster – just upstairs – please feel free –"

"Thank you, Gilderoy," said Dumbledore, cutting the Defense professor off.

The silent crowd parted for the Headmaster as those requested followed him, as did Snape and McGonagall and Flitwick. The remaining professors shepherd the students back to their common rooms with the help of the prefects.

He really should've listened to that voice telling him to go the other way, Harry thought in hindsight. If he had, he wouldn't be in this mess now. The caretaker already didn't like him because of his nightly wanderings and now he thought he killed his cat!

His tense shoulders relaxed slightly when he felt the calming hand of Derrick on his shoulder. Glancing up, Harry let out a small sigh. Someone believed in him. He needed all the help he could get. Of the six staff members, two held a healthy dislike (Harry was sure it was full blown hatred) of him and he wasn't sure about the Headmaster. He had seen Professor Dumbledore's gaze linger on him more than once.

The two Ravenclaw's stood back and out of the way when the professors began examining Mrs. Norris on Lockhart's desk.

It took a while but at last, Dumbledore straightened up. Harry looked at him anxiously, waiting for
"She's not dead, Argus," he spoke softly to the distraught man.

Harry ignored the exclamations of the Defense professor, focusing on what Dumbledore said next. Not dead? She looked pretty dead to him. Filch seemed to have the same thoughts.

"She has been petrified. But how, I cannot say..." he trailed off in thought as if remembering something important.

"Ask him!" Filch shrieked, pointing accusingly at Harry who moved to defend himself as Derrick moved slightly in front of Harry.

Dumbledore, quite tired of Filch's unfounded accusations, moved to stop the caretaker, "No second-year could have done this. It would take Dark Magic of the most advanced –"

Filch was beyond reason at this point, "He did it, he did it! You saw what he wrote on the wall!"

"Really, Argus? I'll not stand for this slander against my student. What proof, other than circumstantial evidence, do you have that Mr. Potter did what you accuse him off? Practicing Dark Magic is a serious charge." Flitwick may only be 137 cm but he cowered the caretaker into backing away. It was a reminder that the half-goblin had been a Dueling Champion for some time.

Gaining confidence from his Head defending him, Harry finally spoke up, "I never touched Mrs. Norris! I found her like that, like everyone else!"

He was aware of all eyes turning to stare at him.

"If I might speak, Headmaster," drawled Snape, finally stepping out of his dark corner. Harry and Derrick both tensed. "Perhaps, Potter may have simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

It was said with a slight sneer curling his mouth as if he doubted his own suggestion. Harry felt his mouth drop open at the unexpected defense.

"But," there it was. Nothing with Snape was ever what it seemed. "We do have a set of suspicious circumstances here. Why was he in the upstairs corridor at all? Why wasn't he at the Halloween feast?"

He was ready to jump to his defense, knowing Snape wanted nothing more than to get him in actual trouble, "I was in the library. Madam Pince can tell you –"

"Yes, but why not go to the feast? Why were you in this corridor?" Snape's eyes glittered in triumph in the candlelight.

All eyes looked at him for an answer. Why hadn't he been at the feast and why had he been in that corridor?

He fumbled for an answer. It sounded stupid to say it, like he was some little kid. Biting his lip, Harry tried to mumble out a response, "I um...I was –"

"Speak up and stop babbling like a buffoon!" Snape snapped at him in irritation.

Unable to hold back his anger at the professor, he took the bait. He stood, shrugging off Derrick's hand. "My parent's died today, sorry I don't want to celebrate their death!" Harry was just as
vicious. He knew there would be punishment later for his outburst but he didn't care, Snape has had this coming. "You may not care that my mum and dad are dead, but I do. I don't care if Voldemort," there were a few cringes at the name, "died that night. I'd rather have my parents back."

Surprisingly, Snape had nothing to say to that. If anything, the look on his face reminded Harry of regret? It was an odd emotion to see on the greasy haired professor's face, one that was quickly replaced by his usual scowl.

A moment passed for tempers to cool before Dumbledore broke the silence, "As understandable as your situation is Mr. Potter, you still have yet to answer why you were in this particular corridor? The staircase to the Ravenclaw common room is the same as the one from the library."

"I -" Harry struggled with his answer. In the muggle world, hearing voices no one else could wasn't a good sign and he was sure it was the same in the wizarding world. But if he didn't give some possible excuse, he'd be a suspect. He had to tell the truth. "I was following a voice."

He heard Snape scoff in disbelief which he ignored. He didn't need to convince the Head of Slytherin; he needed to convince the Headmaster of his innocence, who seemed to be holding off on his dismissal of his claim for now. "A voice? What was it saying?"

Harry thought back to when he first heard the voice, to the terror that enveloped his body. It was like nothing he had ever felt before. A shiver of fear went through his body as those words replayed in his mind.

"It was…It was like nothing I've ever heard before. It didn't sound human; I felt like my entire body had been frozen." Concerned looks were shared at this. "It talked about killing…that it had been so long since it ate last…It sounded like it was hunting."

Snape leaned forward, gaze never leaving Harry's, sneer already in place, "So naturally you followed it. Figured you didn't need a professor to help you."

"Severus!" Dumbledore's sharp reprimand was enough to silence any snarky retort Snape had left. Harry looked at the Headmaster in disbelief. He believed him! "Please, continue."

"Um…I got to the second floor and it sounded like it was near me, in the corridor somewhere. It got excited…said it smelled blood and that was the last thing I heard." Harry looked Dumbledore in the eyes, willing him to believe he had nothing to do with this. "I walked the rest of the corridor because I thought someone had been injured – why else would there be blood? – and I found that message and Mrs. Norris."

Dumbledore's gaze didn't leave Harry's. He felt like the aged wizard was reading his mind. Finally, his gaze shifted to his deputy. "I believe precautions will need to be taken in light of recent events. I trust you to take care of them?" Receiving a nod, he turned to Snape, "Please check with Pomara on when her Mandrakes will be ready for the Restorative Draught. I feel we may be in need of it."

Harry's eyes widened as he turned to Derrick who had a similar expression gracing his face. The way he said it…it was like he was expecting this to happen again!

"After that, I want to meet with you in my office." Snape's expression didn't change except for a narrowing of his eyes but Harry figured that could be considered his normal expression. "Filius, if you could escort Mr. Potter and Mr. Hopkins to their common room?"

Nodding, the Ravenclaw Head motioned for his eagles to follow him. It was late and with the
events of the night, it would not be wise to send them off alone.

"Oh, and 20 points from Ravenclaw for recklessness, Mr. Potter." Harry accepted the punishment. Considering the situation, it could've been worse. He could've done without Snape's smug smirk which was quickly wiped off at the Headmaster's next words, "And 25 points to Ravenclaw for defending a fellow student, Mr. Hopkins."

The walk back to the tower was quiet and neither student knew what to say. Unable to stand it anymore, Harry turned to Flitwick, "Professor, what exactly is the Chamber of Secrets?"

Sighing, the Charms professor had hoped to avoid this question but his eagles were an inquisitive bunch. "Legend has it being a secret chamber built by Salazar Slytherin himself. It is said to house a monster only he and his descendants could control. But in the millennia since, no one has been able to find it."

Derrick looked skeptical, "But sir, the Headmaster seems convinced that this will happen again. Has it happened before?"

Has it happened before? If it did, was the person ever caught? And what was the monster? Surely someone would've seen something if it had.

Already on edge from the night's events, Flitwick bristled under the questions. "No more questions for now. It's late and I want the two of you off to bed."

The castle was quiet and for the first time, Harry was uncomfortable being out in the corridors past curfew. He had wandered these halls countless times and never felt like he did now. He doubted even his Invisibility Cloak would take this feeling away.

A chiming rang out, the noise echoing in the empty halls.

Was it that late? It didn't feel like midnight. Harry wondered if the boys would still be up waiting for him or if they had given up and fell asleep.

They bid the professor goodnight as they entered the common room. It was empty, even the embers in the fireplace were cold.

The sudden weight of the night finally settled on him, and Harry felt like collapsing onto the sofa instead of making his way up to his room. He was prevented from doing just that when he felt a pair of eyes trailing his every movement. Turning, his eyes searched Derrick's, now wondering why he came to his defense when no one else had.

"I've seen you, you're not cruel Harry. Besides, anyone with half a brain would know you couldn't do it." Derrick let out a quiet laugh. The seventeen-year-old amused as he gazed at his young seeker. "No offense, but you're not smart enough to know any spell that could do that. Most seventh-years wouldn't even be able to perform a spell that powerful."

Harry didn't know whether to be offended or grateful but he did bring up a valid point. Dumbledore had said the spell was Dark Magic and powerful. Who would believe a second-year could cast that? Heart a little less heavy, Harry bid his captain goodnight and set off to his room for some well-needed rest.

Dark blue eyes followed his movement up the stairs thoughtfully before following. Tomorrow was a different day. They would see what it brought.
Only one of them slept peacefully that night.

.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Harry discovers something about himself leading him to question his life and he is caught near another attack

Whispers seemed to follow him the next morning but nothing more, for that, Harry was thankful. The talk seemed to center more around the Chamber of Secrets and what exactly it was. It seemed he wasn't the only one curious about the legend as his History lesson saw Hermione Granger ask Professor Binns to elaborate on the legend.

By the end of the ghost's rant, Harry was sure of one thing…the Chamber was real and Slytherin was a complex and confusing character who had so many issues. Binns never said the founder didn't want Muggleborns because he hated them, just that they were untrustworthy. Those were two different things to Harry and it made him curious about the man so many people feared.

"So," a voice came up behind Harry, almost making him trip he was so lost inside his own mind. "I heard Binns told your class about the Chamber?"

It was Derrick and his friends. Harry looked to his year mates who waved him on. It wasn’t unusual for Harry to join up with his Quidditch teammates.

"Yeah. D'you know Professor Binns is really bad at names? He called me Mr. Peters." Harry fell in step with the group as they made their way towards the library. “We’ve been in his class for almost two years!”

Nate, Derrick's best friend, snorted. "The only thing Binns is good at is putting students to sleep."

Chuckles went around the group at that.

"So, did you learn anything interesting?" Emily questioned, moving closer to Ryan.

Shifting his bag to his other shoulder, Harry shrugged. "Not really. He thinks it's a tale, a legend, nothing more."

"Every legend has some truth to it." Nate pointed out as he twirled his wand absentmindedly.

That’s what Granger had said.

"I bet the Slytherin's are loving this…all the chaos and fear that message has caused." Harry had a sense that Nate didn't really care at all that much for the snake house. Not that he didn't understand. Malfoy usually went out of his way to make Harry's life miserable. With the boy on the Slytherin Quidditch team, Harry was looking forward to putting him in his place. It also didn't help that Marcus Flint had put Derrick in the Hospital Wing two years ago with a severe concussion and broken arm.

Entering the library, ignoring the glare Madam Pince sent Harry, the three made their way to the back tables while the Ryan and Emily found a separate table to work on their Care of Magical Creatures assignment. "So, have you finished your homework for Professor Snape?"
Letting out a groan of frustration, Harry dumped his knapsack on the table, ignoring the snickers the two let out.

"You know what I got on my last assignment – an Acceptable! You two even looked over everything on it and made corrections! At minimum it should've been an Exceeds Expectations!" Harry grumbled as he found his roll of parchment his potions essay was on. He wasn't trying to sound arrogant but with the work that went into his assignments and Derrick and Nate’s help, he knew the grade he should be receiving and it wasn’t an Acceptable.

Derrick and Nate did feel for the second-year. They knew Snape wasn't a fair teacher but he was almost cruel in his treatment of the young eagle.

"Have you tried going to Professor Flitwick? I'm sure he'd speak to him." Nate offered as he pulled out his Transfiguration homework.

Harry took the potions book Derrick offered him, turning to the table of contents to find the right section. He made sure he cross-checked his work with at least four other sources. It was ridiculous but that was the only way he knew he would pass Snape's class. Pulling out his inkwell, Harry finally answered the question, "And give him the satisfaction? He'd never let me live it down."

He knew Snape was growing agitated; his potions have been near perfect thanks to the two seventh-years help so Snape couldn't insult his work or intelligence though he did try to accuse him of cheating which failed when his potion was the best of the entire class.

"Blimey, that's some bad luck." Nate leaned back in his chair, stretching his back out before he bent over to start his essay.

"I didn't think it was that bad but you should've seen him the other night Nate. He was looking for any excuse to get Harry in trouble! The Headmaster had to get involved." Derrick remembered that encounter with somewhat fondness; it wasn't often someone got to see the potions professor put in his place. "Even Professor Flitwick said something!"

Nate let out a whistle, impressed that skinny little Harry was able to take that sort of abuse. "Give me your essay when you're finished and I'll look over it."

Nodding, Harry buried his head in his textbook, wanting to get the assignment over with. The three dissolved into silence, each working on their own piece of homework. Harry occasionally broke the silence with a question but otherwise, the three Ravenclaw's lost themselves in their work.

It was becoming a common occurrence to see the second-year with the two seventh-years. Before the attack, Harry would spend his time with his year mates or by himself but since Halloween, Derrick and Nate had been inviting him to study with them more and more. He suspected it was to deter the whispering but Harry wasn't sure why. He wasn't going to question their actions though as he enjoyed their company. It also helped that he was learning advanced magic from them as he was able to watch them practice their spell work for classes.

/ 

Excitement was hanging in the air as the first Quidditch match of the year drew nearer. It was Gryffindor versus Slytherin which meant it was bound to be good. It also meant Harry would get a chance to see if Malfoy was as good as he frequently boasted. He was desperately hoping the boy had a thorough humiliation today, enough so he wouldn't show his slimy face around the castle for a while.
It wasn't a tame match, especially with the bad weather. Oliver Wood was knocked off his broom by a bludger and Angelica Johnson barely missed being sent into the stands. The Weasley Twins made sure to dish out some payback. They returned the favor and Miles Bletchley was taken out by a bludger. Harry openly cheered when one of them got Malfoy. Sadly, it didn't stop him from getting the snitch. The game was close though. The Gryffindor chasers had managed to score a handful of goals while Bletchley took time to recover.

Derrick brought the team together after the match to go over what they had seen. Gryffindor played how they expected, being it was the same team as the year before but Derrick made sure to highlight the danger the Weasley Twins posed.

"They're some of the best beaters I've seen. You need to be careful of them out there." He spoke to Harry directly but addressed the entire team.

Slytherin was the team they were most curious about. For all his big talk, Malfoy was a pretty decent player, they had to grudgingly admit.

"We have a week to prepare for Hufflepuff. I'm adding one more training session and I want to work on our passing. If we have any hope of winning the Cup this year, we need to start off with a strong lead!"

Harry couldn't tell if he was more excited or nervous about his first game. Though he felt on the little queasy side as he stared down at his breakfast the morning of the game. The butterflies in his stomach felt like they were about to fly out his throat he was so nervous.

Emily noticed and came over to calm his nerves. "It's Hufflepuff – no one will get hurt. You're an amazing flyer and an even better Seeker." She patted his cheek before ruffling his messy hair.

Harry nodded, still nervous but slightly more confident which lasted until he got up to leave and every Ravenclaw he passed wished him luck.

The game couldn't have gone any worse. While his nerves left him once he finally made it up into the air, that was about the best part of the game. Not even five minutes in and he was already dodging a bludger that wouldn't leave him alone. Duncan and Samuels did a good job of keeping it away but that left their chasers wide open.

There was no way he could continue the rest of the game like this, he thought as he dodgers the bludger for the tenth time.

Derrick motioned for a time-out only a quarter of an hour into the game. It was too dangerous and someone had obviously messed with the bludger. The game needed to be stopped.

"No!" The six looked at Harry, shocked at his adamant refusal. "I want to finish this. Give me five minutes. If I haven't got it by then, call the game."

Derrick trusted Harry and gave him his five minutes. Harry wouldn't let him down.

The time ended and the teams made their way back into the air.

Three minutes into his time, the bludger finally hit its target. An excruciating pain took over his senses as he both heard and felt his right elbow crack but he wasn't about the give up – the snitch was in his sights! Willing his Nimbus 2000 to go as fast as it could, he reached the Snitch and he felt the fluttering wings brush against his fingers as it became enclosed in his left hand.

His joy was short lived as the bludger came back around. He couldn't dodge it this time. With his
broken arm and his other hand holding the snitch, he was only barely holding onto his broom with his feet.

In a great show of teamwork, Harry was grabbed by Samuels as Duncan blasted the damned thing to the other end of the pitch as it made another pass.

On the ground, Harry found himself engulfed in a sea of people, all offering their congratulations as he was passed around to each team member in their excitement over their win. They had won by 200 points! This put them in the lead for the Cup!

His joy was short lived.

Emily, who seemed to be the only sensible one of the group, remembered his broken arm and extracted him from the group when she noticed him wincing in pain at all the jostling. Harry could feel the bone pieces grating together as he tried not to move it. The adrenaline was wearing off and the pain was coming back tenfold. It was literally the worst pain he had ever felt in his life.

"Make way, make way!" the pompous voice of the blond haired bimbo echoed over the cheers as the man strutted onto the pitch.

No, no! Anyone but him! Harry tried to move away but somehow the professor was faster. Lockhart pushed Emily away from Harry, Ryan grabbing her before she hit the ground. Hand gripping his right arm above his broken elbow, Harry tried to hold back a gasp of pain as the Defense professor jerked him forward.

"Hey –!" Shouts of outrage resounded around them, various voices coming to his defense.

"Now now, I know just the spell to fix you right up, Mr. Potter. Not to worry." Lockhart's blinding white smile assaulted his swimming vision. His mind was too clouded in pain to put up a proper effort of resistance.

Harry could hear a multitude of shouts and he was thankful to welcome the darkness as Lockhart prepared his spell.

//

Waking up in the Hospital Wing after his first game was not exactly how Harry pictured his day ending. But what did he care, he had caught the snitch and won the game!

Moving to sit up, he felt horror creep through his body when only his left arm responded.

Merlin! He couldn't feel his arm! What had that man done?!! His wide, terrified eyes stared at the limp thing that he used to call his arm.

"It okay," a voice spoke to soothe his fears. "Madam Pomfrey gave you SkeloGrow while you were unconscious but you'll need to stay overnight." It was Derrick, who was now occupying the chair next to his bed. Looking around, Harry saw the rest of the team along with – Ginny Weasley? He hadn't spoken to her since the first week of school.

Derrick started talking to him again, gaining his attention, "Lockhart magic away’d the bones in your arm."

There was a hint of disgust in his voice that was reflected on everyone's face. No one here was a big fan of their Defense professor it seemed.
"But we still won! And that was a wicked catch, Harry! I don't think I've ever seen someone catch a snitch while one hand was broken!" Ryan sang him praise which everyone agreed was a pretty impressive feat.

Young Ginny Weasley stepped forward nervously, "…Hi, um…I uh, I made you this card! Ihopeyougetbettersoon!"

Harry stared wide-eyed at the card, taking it in his left hand carefully and unsure. "…Er…thanks, Ginny."

The first year blushed such a deep red, you couldn't tell where her hair ended and her face began as she bolted from the Hospital Wing.

"Ooooohhh! Harry's got an admirer already!" Ryan teased as Emily tried to shush him.

Harry found himself blushing, it wasn't like that with Ginny. They were just friends, at least he hoped they still were. He tried to explain that, "She was just nervous to be around you guys is all."

A collective laugh went around the group at the teasing; everyone was still in a good mood due to the final score. Harry was sad he'd miss the party when Madam Pomfrey came shooing the team out.

A few hours later, something called a House Elf interrupted his sleep and claimed responsibility for the bludger and the Platform and how Harry Potter shouldn't be at Hogwarts. Harry felt a sense of dread creep up his spine when the elf disappeared and the professors brought in a petrified student. He heard them whisper about the attack and a bit of fear the dread when he heard the catch in Professor McGonagall’s voice. If she was worried about this chamber, what chance did they have? He couldn't get back to sleep after that.

What good feeling Harry still had about the school year quickly evaporated as paranoia and fear swept across the student body.

With the attack on a student, panic began to set in and with two weeks left of term, notices went up of a Dueling Club. Curious, most of the younger years attended to see what it was about. With Lockhart as their professor, they hadn't done much spell casting and were eager to learn how to properly duel. Harry was really hoping it was Professor Flitwick who would be teaching them. As a former Dueling Champion, he would have valuable insight.

Harry joined his group of Ravenclaws as they met up with the Gryffindor second-years. Oddly enough, the only person Harry really knew from Gryffindor was Parvati and that was only because she was Padma's twin sister. He had spoken briefly and on occasion with Granger but besides that, he hadn't talked with any of the lions beyond the odd pairing in class.

"Why don't they have a Dueling Club all the time?" Harry inquired to Terry, who had an older brother at Hogwarts. "This would be amazing to have with Defense…and practical." He added almost as an afterthought, thinking of the two defense professors they had had so far.

"I read in Hogwarts: A History, that there used to be a Dueling Club for centuries until too many injuries occurred in the 1950's and 60's due to Dark Magic. It's why Professor Dumbledore forbid the practice of the Dark Arts in the curriculum and on the school grounds." Granger's know-it-all voice answered for Terry. She had been listening in on the conversation and concluded that Terry wouldn't know the answer since it had been a few decades since the rule change.
Harry froze, disbelief evident on his face, "Wait…so, Hogwarts actually taught the Dark Arts at one point?"

Hermione sent him a baffled look. "Haven't you read Hogwarts: A History? It details –"

"A history of Hogwarts," Harry cut her off in a mocking voice, trying to refrain from rolling his eyes. He didn't mean to but he didn't like how she talked to him like he was some little kid that didn't understand anything. "I've gathered."

A few surrounding students couldn't hold in their snorts and snickers, resulting in the Gryffindor turning red in embarrassment.

"I meant," Harry continued, bringing the attention back to him, “With its reputation, I wouldn't think Hogwarts would teach students the Dark Arts. That magic is said to corrupt the souls of the users, twisting them beyond recognition.

It was, surprisingly, a Hufflepuff who answered that question. Ernie, if Harry remembered right.

"The Dark Arts weren't really regarded any differently than regular magic up until the last century. The rise of two powerful Dark Lords in the span of half a century caused a wave of panic. Dark Magic was being used illegally and the Ministry decided to ban it all together as it was mainly followers of You-Know-Who that were using it."

Many turned to him for more information. "Why teach Dark Wizards? Better take it all away so others aren't tempted." Ernie glanced at Harry briefly before averting his eyes.

The conversation gathered the interest of the surrounding students as they waited for eight o'clock to come around.

"My Aunty fought in the last war. She said the Death Eaters were the worst lot she’d ever fought against. You-Know-Who killed entire families just for refusing to join him. If it hadn’t been for Harry, she doesn't think the Ministry could've won the war." Susan Bones spoke softly, recounting what her aunt reluctantly parted with her when she’d ask about their family.

Eyes turned to Harry in worship. It was a feeling he hadn’t felt all year, most forgetting he had defeated the Dark Lord all those years ago after hanging around him for a while. Shifting uncomfortably, he was saved by the appearance of Lockhart and Snape of all people.

Knowing the only reason the two would be here, Harry debated if he should just turn and leave right there. But his curiosity got the better of him. Was Snape as good a duelist as he was a Potion Master?

He laughed with the others as Snape sent Lockhart to the ground with barely a flick of his wand. With any luck, at least one of his least favorite professors would get utterly humiliated. The two professors broke the students off into groups and Harry went to pair with Hermione, the only other person in the area without a partner.

Snape cut in before the two could start.

"Fortunately Potter, I have a better partner in mind. Let's see what the famous Harry Potter makes of a real challenge. One where you can’t cheat your way out of." His lip curled in disgust as he took in the last Potter, a sadistic pleasure lighting his eyes as he called forth Draco. "And you Miss Granger – you can partner with Miss Bulstrode."

Harry watched the greasy haired man with a fire burning in his eyes. He knew the two didn't get
along and to place them together like this – he was planning something to humiliate him.

Turning his rage to Malfoy, the two copied the instructions of before, barely inclining their head to the other. Harry didn't trust the blond snake and his suspicion was well founded as Malfoy had already started his spell before the count of three.

With years of evading bullies and recent Quidditch training, Harry managed to dodge the spell, throwing his own when he gathered his bearings, "Flipendo!"

Seeing the jinx hit, Harry moved onto his next spell and shot bright blue flames out of his wand. He watched, smug as Malfoy sat upright, straight into the path of the flames. They wouldn't hurt him directly, just his clothes.

Harry saw the arrogant look drop into fear as the blond hurried to move out of the path of the flames.

A black cloak disintegrated the blue flames before they could reach their target.

"The instructions were to disarm your opponent only, Mr. Potter!" Snape's harsh voice cut through the confusion of the students, turning the attention to the Ravenclaw and Slytherin.

Harry held his gaze, he hadn't done anything wrong. "Honestly Professor, I thought you said disrobe." He was challenging him. He had thought Malfoy would humiliate him but Harry had turned the tables. "It wouldn't have hurt Malfoy, the flames are harmless to people."

He wasn't wrong; the flames were harmless to people, only able to catch fabric on fire but the person only felt a slight warmth, no burning. It was a simple spell, something the professor most likely knew.

"10 points from Ravenclaw for not listening to instructions properly." Harry felt his mouth drop open slightly in disbelief. Seriously?! "Perhaps, it would be prudent to first teach the students how to block unfriendly spells, Professor?" Snape drawled as he addressed Lockhart, dismissing Harry for now and moving on to his new target.

Fumbling to regain control and composure, Lockhart quickly agreed, clapping his hands and looking away from Snape's black glinted eyes. "Excellent idea, Professor Snape! Let's have a volunteer pair…!"

"No need, Potter and Malfoy will do." A twisted smile graced his pale face and Harry thought it made his hooked nose look even bigger; needless to say, it wasn't a pleasant face to look at.

Making his way to the center of the room, Harry ignored the sympathetic looks thrown his way and the predatory looks given by the Slytherins. Honestly, he had this match in the bag if Snape manhandling Malfoy to his feet and whispering harshly in his ear was anything to go by. Back straight and shoulder set square, Harry waited with his own smile. He had defeated Malfoy already, now they'd have the pleasure of an audience.

"Now, Harry," started Lockhart, crawling up behind him, "When Draco.-."

His emerald eyes barely moved to acknowledge the professor, "I've got this, Professor," he said with steely determination and confidence.

Lockhart backed away, eyes darting back and forth in unease, looking ready to start biting his perfectly manicured nails.
Malfy and Harry were now standing face to face, wands at the ready, "Scared Potter?" muttered Malfy, grey eyes narrowed.

Emerald eyes stared back, lips slightly curling up, "You wish."

"On my mark! Three – two – one – go!"

Harry was prepared for Draco to cheat once again, moving to the side quickly to dodge the jinx he knew would be sent his way, wand already at the ready, *Impedimenta*, dying on his lips when he finally realized what his opponent had done.

"*Serpensortia!*"

He had summoned a long, black snake. One that looked pissed as it rose up, ready to strike the first thing it laid eyes on. Unfortunately, that happened to be Harry. He could hear students scream and back away from the platform as the snake came closer. Heart beating fast, Harry tried to look as unthreatening as possible, not making any sudden moves from his crouched position. He knew snakes were fast and some were venomous. He didn't want to test out if this one was.

"Don't move, Potter." He knew Snape was enjoying this. This must've been what he whispered into Malfy's ear. Harry didn't dare move his eyes from the snake to glare at the man. "I'll get rid of it."

"Allow me!" Lockhart brandished his wand before Snape had a chance to 'save' Harry. He literally felt his heart stop as the snake was sent ten feet up before falling in exactly the same spot, its eyes glued on Harry. Enraged, hissing furiously, the snake poised to strike, fangs exposed and dripping in what Harry assumed was venom.

Without thinking and no other option, he shouted at the snake, "*S*Stop!"

Oddly enough, the snake stopped. He found himself letting out his breath, gulping in much-needed air as he tried to calm his racing heart.

When the snake vanished into a puff of black smoke, Harry became aware of the multitude of eyes glued to his form. His eyes swept over the students and not one looked away from him and he swore he saw fear in a few. The emerald orbs locked onto the man in front of him as he took a step forward. Even Snape was looking at him in a puzzling way; it was shrewd and calculating with a hint of suspicion. He could hear muttering pick up, echoing off the stone walls.

This was Snape's fault, all of it!

"What were you playing at? It could've killed me!" Anger like he'd never felt, rose up in him. The only time he could remember being this angry was when he was left by the Dursley’s. But this was different, he'd learned to stand up for himself since then. His eyes flashed like the curse he was famous for surviving.

Footsteps could be heard scrambling back, frantic to get as far away as possible from the enraged second-year.

Harry could make out the whispers if he concentrated, "*He's a parselmouth!*" "*Did you see him talk to that snake!?!*" "*He's the Heir – ?*"

What were they talking about? Yeah, he told the snake to stop and what the hell was a parselmouth?

Harry remained glowering at Snape whose expression hadn't changed, if anything, it was more
"That seems like enough fun for one night, don't you think?" Lockhart's booming voice cut through the trances of everyone. There was a shakiness almost nervous quality to it. "Off to bed with you, don't want to be out past curfew!"

For once, Harry was grateful for the bumbling professor. Grabbing his bag, Harry took off, not thinking about how the students scrambled to get out of his way.

He didn't understand what happened, he needed answers!

Far enough away from the Great Hall, Harry pulled out his Invisibility Cloak, glad he had packed it this morning. Throwing it on, he made his way to the library. Finding the farthest table back, Harry set his stuff down carefully.

The darkness was both a comfort and source of trepidation. The castle was eerily silent; the cold and damp having sunk into the stone foundation with the recent onset of winter. He was hidden from prying eyes but there was something out there that he couldn't see and only he could hear. His hair was already standing on edge as he pulled out his notebook.

Scribbling parselmouth on a new page, he chewed his pencil. What was a parselmouth? The way it was said made him believe it was a language but he didn't know another language.

Pushing his glasses up, he grabbed his practice snitch and whispered his Bluebell Flame spell and released it back into the air.

Now to find the language section. He remembered passing it last year when he was trying to figure out Latin so it didn't take long to find it again. Pulling out the first book that looked like it might help, he levitated it beside him and moved on. With three good tomes, he made his way back to his bag and notebook.

Opening Ancient Languages: Spoken Magik's, he prepared himself for a long, boring read.

The Language of Spell Casting was next. This proved slightly more helpful as it talked about how spell casting has evolved throughout time from the ancient Greeks to the present. But he couldn't find anything about parselmouth.

His last book, Forbidden Languages, gave him what he wanted.

"Parseltongue, the language of snakes, was first recorded being used by Herpo the Foul in Ancient Greece. So began its legacy of darkness. Throughout history, Parselmouth's have been noted as not only Dark Wizards but powerful Dark Wizards. The most famous Parselmouth is none other than Hogwarts Founder, Salazar Slytherin. He was known to speak to snakes and even had a serpent as a familiar. Slytherin, and his descendants, prized their ability to speak to serpents above all else. The most recent Parselmouth, readers should remember, is He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, who devastated Britain before his terror was cut short in 1981.

Parseltongue is believed to be hereditary as no records exist of anyone outside Slytherin's family line having the ability. It is a mark of a Dark Wizard. The mark of a serpent is not only historically associated with evilness but used in the vilest of rituals. It has-."

Harry slammed the book closed and shoved it away from him.

…It couldn't be true…he couldn't be a descendant of Slytherin, he was in Ravenclaw!…he wasn't dark…he couldn't be…He was nothing like Voldemort!
With a panic he couldn't quite explain, Harry descended upon the library shelves with purpose, ignoring the chill in the air as outside the castle the snowfall turned into a blizzard.

Harry found himself with a biography of Salazar Slytherin, a book on the genealogy of British Pureblood Families, and *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*.

His notebook was filled with little notes and questions more than anything else.

When he found his face pressed into the crease of his notebook, not remembering when he dozed off, the young black-haired boy decided to call it a night. Somewhat awake as he packed up his bag, Harry noticed how cold he was; he could barely feel his toes and his body was shivering. It would be smart to return to the dormitory to get – looking at his watch – three hours of sleep before he had to be up for breakfast.

The walk to the tower was hard as he found himself wanting to lean against walls and close his eyes. Sleep…sleep sounded pretty good right about now. Snuggled up in his pajamas, under a warm comforter, head laid upon the softest, fluffiest pillow as he drifts into deep sleep.

Jerking himself out of those thoughts, Harry resumed his climb. Why did they have to be so far up?

A yawn escaped his dry lips as he blinked his eyes, trying to focus on the landing in front of him. Was that…was someone there? The image blurred again but it definitely looked like someone was staring at him. More alert, Harry pulled out his wand discretely. He was still under his cloak so how could someone see him. Narrowing his eyes, the hair on his arms stood and he was pretty certain it had nothing to do with the cold.

But…no one was there. He reached the landing and there was no sign of anyone having been there. But he hadn't heard any footsteps leaving either.

Maybe he was imaging things? He was practically asleep as is and it had been a trying day. It was normal for people to imagine things in the dark. Convincing his sleep addled mine was easy as he made his way to the tower with no further incident.

Urgh! He had to answer a riddle to get in! It was that or wait out here in the cold. He pulled the knocker and prepared himself: *You saw me where I never was and where I could not be. And yet within that very place, my face you often see. What am I?*

Dammit…he was too tired to think. "I don't know, my memory? A mirror? A reflection?"

The statue swung open. Harry didn't even bother to think of what the actual answer was. Stuffing his cloak in his bag, he collapsed onto the sofa closest to the still burning fireplace, asleep before his head fully hit the pillow.

"You should really be careful of the Nargles. They like to hide your belongings." A dreamy voice lured Harry from his chaotic dreams. Groggily sitting up, Harry felt a blanket drop into his lap. Staring at it in confusion, he tried to remember if he had covered himself with a blanket last night. And where were his glasses? When it wasn't coming back to him, he remembered the voice, "I'm sorry, what?" he questioned, still feeling around for his specks.

He finally found them sitting on top of his bag. Putting them on, he could finally get a look at the person who woke him up.

It was a very peculiar girl with an odd necklace and the dreamiest smile he'd ever seen on anyone’s
face. Honestly, if he had to say, she looked like Damian when he came back to the orphanage high one night.

"Don’t let the Nargles get you down, Harry Potter. They’ll go away eventually."

Rubbing his head, Harry wondered if he was still sleeping. Merlin, what was the time? Glancing at his watch, it was only 6:30. He still had an hour until breakfast.

He watched the girl skip to the portal door, "Wait! What's your name?"

Her hair seemed to flow behind her as she turned to him, "Luna Lovegood."

Feeling the grease in his hair, Harry maneuvered himself off the sofa and collected his belongings as he made his way to his room. He needed a shower, a hot one. Feeling the heat loosen his stiff muscles, Harry leaned his head on the tile wall, letting his thoughts wander as the water washed the soap from his body. While he felt refreshed after the shower, he still felt a bone-deep tiredness that called for him to go back to sleep. A pounding headache was making itself known as he pulled clean robes on and gently closed the door to his dormitory.

Unlike the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff second-years, Harry learned at breakfast, Potions was definitely NOT canceled. Just what he needed, an hour sitting with Snape breathing down his neck. Why did he have to have Potions on the last day of term?

Breakfast was filled with everything to warm you up. The eggs were still steaming and the bread still baby soft warm. Harry bypassed all of those and poured himself the biggest cup of hot chocolate he could. Cream and whipped cream were added. It was just enough sugar to give him the awareness he needed and the warmth spread from his inside out. Going for a second, a voice made him pause.

"Hey, easy on the hot chocolate. You have any more sugar, you'll crash in Potions." It was Derrick. He was bundled in a rather warm looking sweater, his usual school robe missing. Noticing the look, Derrick explained his state of undress. "Care of Magical Creatures was canceled for this morning. Professor Kettleburn can't get the Bowtruckle's to come out, what with the snow and all…and seeing as we've already had our lesson on them, it'd be pointless to have class so he let us off."

Harry nodded, not knowing what a bowtruckle was but understanding the general gist of it. He brought the hot cocoa to his mouth to take another drink when the cup was taken from his hand.

"I meant it! You've had enough sugar this morning. Do you think Snape will like you getting sick in his class or falling asleep?" Seeing his head shake, Derrick handed Harry a warm piece of toast instead. "Just…keep your head today, okay? Rumors about yesterday have already spread."

Harry looked at Derrick nervously. What did he think of the rumors?

"Please, you're m'best seeker. I'm not given you up." His blue eyes crinkled as he assured Harry he was still on his side. He moved to go sit with another seventh-year, Laura, Harry thought her name was. Seeing him put his arm around her, he realized that she was probably his girlfriend but he couldn’t remember the teenager ever mentioning her before.

Derrick was right though, he could already feel the richness of the chocolate settling in his stomach. Grabbing his toast and glass of water, he made himself scarce. Better to keep his head down if the looks he was receiving were anything to go by.

Munching on his toast, Harry pondered what exactly those rumors said. It's not like he had the
snake attack anyone. Besides, if anyone should be in trouble, it should be Malfoy for using the curse in the first place.

Harry really should've listened to Derrick this morning. Sitting over his cauldron, his potion almost complete, he couldn't help but feel a little queasy. The sugary richness turned in his stomach again. The fumes weren't making it any easier to hold it down. Looking around, he saw he was the farthest one along so hopefully he could finish early and make his way to the nearest bathroom.

Taking deep breaths, he focused on the next ingredient. They were making the Deflating Draught which was similar to the Swelling Solution so it wasn't that difficult. But there were long periods of time between adding ingredients, and holding back his sickness was making him lose track of time. Reading his textbook again, Harry moved to add the powered Haliwrinkle Shell. He wasn't expecting the smoke or the smell when he began to stir…it was too much. Only able to turn his body away from his cauldron, Harry released his stomach contents into the aisle way.

"POTTER!" The expected, angry reprimand came swiftly. Honestly, Snape could be yelling at him in different languages and he wouldn't know the difference. The entire room was spinning to the point he feared he might fall from his chair.

An unexpected rough grip on his upper arm kept him upright…at least until he was shoved to the door. "Go to the Infirmary!"

The smell and revulsion at the puke on the floor had his classmates scooting away from him in fear of getting sick themselves.

"But sir, shouldn't someone go with him? He doesn't look that well." It was Padma who spoke up, throwing Harry a concerned glance as he wobbled on his feet.

Snape vanished Harry's potion, throwing him an unconcerned glare as if to ask why he was still in his classroom. "Potter is well enough he doesn't need an escort. Unless you want to fail this assignment, Miss Patil, I suggest you focus on your potion and keep your nose out of other people's business."

They all noticed but held back their response. Snape was being unusually cruel today. Especially to Potter. From what his neighbors had seen, his potion had been nearly done and perfect and the Professor had vanished it, no doubt giving him a zero.

The lack of sleep and food were a bad combination. He could barely make it up the steps but he did feel slightly better after getting most of his breakfast out of his body. His could feel the sweats taking over, telling him there was a chance of him getting sick again.

You know, Harry thought, the only thing good about the dungeon was that it kept Snape away from the rest of the school. The Hospital Wing was on the first-floor and he had only just gotten out of the basement. That meant he had two more flights of stair! That meant three floors between him and the greasy bat. With great effort, Harry made it to the first-floor. He was going to find some way to make Snape pay for this. If someone had come with him, he'd have been to the Infirmary by now.

A chill passed through the air, causing a shiver to take over his uncloaked body. Had someone left a window open?

Wrapping his arms around his middle, he wobbled forward, intent on spending the day in the
Infirmary if he could just sleep.

His movement was stopped by the sudden bang of a door behind him; whipping around (almost losing his balance), wand already in hand, Harry relaxed when he saw it was just Peeves and not a monster. Maybe he wouldn't say relaxed, it was still Peeves and he could be worse than any monster.

"Why, it's Potty wee Potter." The poltergeist crackled as he zoomed by Harry, almost knocking his glasses off. "What's Potter up to? Why's Potter lurking –"

Peeves stopped midsentence, halfway through a somersault, when, upside down, he spotted two figures behind him. Flipping right side up faster than his eyes could follow, Peeves began to scream, "ATTACK! ATTACK! ANOTHER ATTACK! NO MORTAL OR GHOST IS SAFE! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!"

"Wha –? Peeves, what are you talking about?" Harry rushed out. If this was the poltergeist's idea of a prank it wasn't funny. This wasn't a joking matter. "There's no attack-?"

Harry found his speech cut off as he finally saw what Peeves was screaming about. Justin Finch-Fletchley and Nearly Headless Nick, frozen like statues.

There was no way he could get out of the corridor in time, he could already hear the hurried footsteps.

McGonagall motioned for Harry to follow her but he was trying very hard not to vomit again.

"Can you gimme a second, Professor? I don't feel all that well." McGonagall gave him a concerned look. He was pale and sweaty and frankly looked like he was about to be sick. Conjuring a bucket, she handed it to the young Ravenclaw. "Thanks."

"Best there than on the floor." Harry saw the normally stern features soften slightly. "Follow me to the Hospital Wing. Once Madam Pomfrey gets you sorted out, I'll have to take you to the Headmaster."

Harry just groaned as he puked what little remained in his stomach into the bucket.

A quick potion and Harry was feeling better, not even arguing when Madam Pomfrey gave him a Pepper Up potion when she took a good look at him, saying he was coming down with the flu.

With his health taken care of, McGonagall led him to the Headmaster's office. Going up the stone staircase, McGonagall rapped on the door and ushered Harry in as it silently opened.

"Wait here while I informed the Headmaster." She placed her hand on his shoulder as if to give him support and Harry could've sworn he saw regret flash across her face.

He looked around, never having been in the office before. It was quite fascinating. A large, beautifully lite circular room, baring curious looking instruments emitting puffs of smoke and in some cases even curiouslyer noises. There were dozens upon dozens of portraits lining the walls of previous headmasters and headmistresses, all who appeared to be taking a late morning snooze. There, sitting on a shelf, was even the Sorting Hat. The Ravenclaw in him was aching to investigate all these new and interesting objects but a strange gagging noise had his attention
It was a bird, at least Harry thought it was a bird. Its feathers were half gone and it looked at him with dull eyes as it laid on its golden perch. Harry felt his heart go out to the bird as it made another gagging noise. His empathy quickly turned to horror when the almost dead animal burst into flames before his brain caught up and realized just what type of bird this was.

He breathed out in relief, "You're a phoenix!"

"That is correct, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore strode somberly into his office, a small smile on his face. "Fawkes is a phoenix. He's been looking dreadful for days; it's a shame you had to see him on his burning day."

Dumbledore seated himself behind his desk, looking at Harry over his half-moon spectacles as the boy moved closer to the perch, looking for the baby phoenix to rise from the ashes. His eyes twinkled as he took in Harry's astonishment at his faithful companion.

Harry wondered if he could pick the small hatchling up and examine it more closely but a small cough broke him out of his musing. Looking around, it wasn't Dumbledore who made the noise, it was a portrait of a previous headmaster, one who was glaring down at him.

Not sure why he was being glared at, Harry moved to sit in front of the Headmaster's desk, unsure what would happen next.

The old wizard let out a sigh as he sat back in his chair. "I've just returned from the Hospital Wing. I have confirmed that Mr. Finch-Fetchley and Sir Nicholas have been merely petrified. They will be perfectly fine once the Mandrake Draught is administered."

That was good news, though Harry wasn't sure why the Headmaster was telling him this. After the attacks on Mrs. Norris and Colin, it was well known they would wake up once the draught was ready.

"I understand Peeves found you in the corridor, alone."

"I got sick in Professor Snape's class and he sent me to the Hospital Wing."

"Ah yes, Madam Pomfrey did say something about the flu. I hope you're feeling a little better?"

Why were they making small talk? Wasn't he going to interrogate him, expel him from the school?

Dumbledore let out a chuckle as if reading his thoughts. "You're not in trouble Harry. I don't believe you have anything to do with these attacks." He paused as if considering his next words carefully. "I do hope you don't mind me asking…did you hear anything before the attack?"

His eyes were searching the depths of his green orbs as if they were hiding the answer to all their problems.

"No sir, nothing."

Dumbledore nodded his head as if he expected that answer, though Harry couldn't shake the feeling that he had let the man down somehow.

"I see you have a lot on your mind, Mr. Potter, is there anything you wish to ask me?"

Harry's head spun…there was a lot he wanted to ask. Could he really be related to Voldemort and
Slytherin? Why did Snape hate him? Why did McGonagall look at him with regret when she didn't think he was looking? He wanted to ask all of those questions but the one that came out had nothing to do with the current happenings at the school.

"There actually is, sir. You see, my home," Okay, he wouldn't actually call that place home, not after living at Hogwarts, "It's being closed come June. They're relocating all the kids but I thought, I dunno, that I..uh…might be able to stay here."

Ahh, that is interesting news. Learning that Harry Potter was not with his Aunt and Uncle but living in an orphanage had truly shocked him. He had thought Petunia would have some love for her sister, enough to take in her only nephew. It seemed he had miscalculated her hatred of Lily and all things magic.

Harry continued on, trying to plead his case, "If I was put with a foster family, I'd have to explain magic and where I go for the rest of the year. But that would break the Statue of Secrecy. But if I could stay here over the summers, that wouldn't be a problem."

It was an unusual case and if things had been different, he'd have no problem letting Harry stay over the summers. At least here, he'd be protected from those who wished him harm. But alas, with recent events, he couldn't allow him to remain while the Chamber was open and the heir loose. He told Harry as much.

Harry bit his lip in frustration. He understood but that didn't make it any easier to hear. "But sir, d'you know how the attacks stopped last time?"

"What do you know of that?" his piercing eyes looked at Harry like he had discovered something he shouldn't've.

"A book, last night. It said the Chamber had been opened in the 40's but the attacks stopped after a girl was killed. Was the heir caught?"

Fifty years was a long time but those memories were easy to bring up, they'd been on his mind all year. If he had done something different, acted on his suspicion, would the girl have died; would Voldemort even exist? These events were connected but he didn't know how. Voldemort was the only Heir of Slytherin and he had it from good sources that his shade was currently in Albania. So how was he doing it? Albus would be the first to admit, there were many things about Tom Riddle that alluded him.

"Someone was caught but I do not believe he was the real culprit." Seeing Harry about to speak, Dumbledore continued, "I don't want you looking into this Harry. Let the professors handle it."

Let the professors handle it? They're doing a fantastic job of that! Four petrified and no one has any idea who the heir is or what the monster could be! He looked at him, asking if he really believed that.

Many of the portraits let out indignant shouts, dropping the pretense of sleep in the wake of such disrespect.

Dumbledore raised his hand, silencing the objections, "My dear boy, do you have so little faith in us?"

A swell of regret began to take over when Harry remembered who exactly he was talking to, "M'sorry, sir."

"You have friends here at Hogwarts, Harry, I trust you know that. Go to them before they leave for
break." There was no point in further conversation so it was best to release Harry to enjoy what remained of the day. In light of the attack, the remaining classes had been canceled.

Seeing his escape, Harry took it, thanking the professor as he shuffled to the door, practically running once he hit the stairs.

"It is wise to let the boy continue unsupervised? He's a parslemouth, the only one in this school!" Murmurs of agreements resonated across the portraits. Dumbledore stood, pacing before his desk. "Albus! You must take action!"

"Phineas, I do not believe young Harry is involved in this attack. Curious, though, that they keep leading back to him. Almost as if-." "

"The boy is a parslemouth and it has long been our belief that the beast inside the chamber is a serpent only controlled by parseltongue!"

Albus stopped in his pacing, turning his attention to Phineas. But it wasn't he who spoke next.

"Albus, you must consider the possibility. There was another boy who was unsuspecting, talented, beloved…a parslemouth." It was the portrait behind his desk, the previous Headmaster, Armando Dippet. His painting reflecting the same heavy burden he once bore when he was alive. "Once is an accident, twice is a coincidence…trice? It's suspicious."

Albus disagreed. He had complete faith in Harry.

"Tom Riddle and Harry Potter could not be more different." Of this he was sure. Of course, from the outside, they were rather similar but he knew, fundamentally, they couldn't be more contrary.

"Everyone believed the same of Mr. Riddle." No, not everyone. Albus had always had his suspicion of the Slytherin. He could never seem to hide his façade from his eyes but he had given the boy a chance, hoping he would see the error of his ways. Was it wrong to do the same for Harry?

/

The students were due to leave for break Sunday morning so that gave Harry the rest of the day and Saturday to deal with the whispers and pointing.

Lunch had passed so he found himself back in the dungeon, hoping his bag was still there. It wasn't.

He entered the common room to an awkward row that he quickly realized was about him.

"-a kid, Laura!"

"That doesn't mean he didn't do it!"

"I can't believe –."

"You've just blinded yourself to him! He's not your brother, Derrick! Your brother's dead and you can't replace him!"

Silence swept the common room at that bombshell. A hush that almost materialized over them as if a line had been crossed. Laura looked shocked, ashamed at her words, but didn't back down. She pleaded for her boyfriend to understand, to see reason.
"Someone had to say it, Der. Potter isn't your brother." She spoke softly, hand coming up to his arm to comfort him.

Harry's eyes scrunched, confusion visible as he tried to understand what was happening.

"I know Will's gone, you think I don't know that? Harry can never replace Will…and I don't want him to because that's not fair to either of them." Derrick stepped away from his girlfriend as she tried to step nearer. "I believe Harry because he's my friend and I trust him. If you, any of you, took the time to know him, you'd realize this." Derrick stopped when he saw Harry by the door, hesitating on if he should continue. Noticing his confusion convinced him to go on. "I'll stand by him…alone…if I have to."

It was directed at the crowd but Harry saw what it was, and so did Laura. It was an ultimatum. She asked him to pick between her and Harry and he picked Harry.

Derrick left his now ex-girlfriend in the middle of the room, shocked and alone, as he strode with purpose to the bespeckled boy he had just defended. Ruffling his hair, he pushed him forward, out the entrance.

Unable to keep his silence anymore, Harry finally blurted out his confusion, "Why did you break up with her over me? Don't you love her?"

Derrick gave Harry a sad smile. "I love her, I've loved her since I was 16."

He didn't understand, "Then why?"

"Did I ever tell you about my brother?" At the shake of his head, Derrick continued, "His name was Will, he'd be a little older than you…if he were alive. Just before You-Know-Who and his followers were defeated," he let out a cough as his voice started to crack, "My dad took Will to Diagon Alley while me mum and I set up for his birthday. They were only supposed to be gone an hour…but then it was two…and then three. The Death Eater's had attacked the alley and they got caught in the middle."

His eyes were darting up as he willed his tears away.

"Will didn't deserve that, he was a baby." He let out another cough before focusing on Harry who had remained frozen. "Laura was right. Sometimes I look at you and I see Will. Who he could've been, the friends he could've had…but I see you too. I see the struggles you face on your own, I see you when you're flying, I see you when you think no one's looking. I would've wanted Will to be your friend."

They were far away from any students now, Derrick having led them from the tower.

"Is that why you put me on the Quidditch Team?"

Derrick let out a semi-wet laugh, "No, that was because you're one hell of a Seeker and I had to have you. I didn't even realize who you were at first. I just knew I had to have you."

None of this made sense, why tell him now?

"With everything going on and the attacks this morning, I told Laura that I was going to ask to come to my place for Christmas. My mum already knows about you and it'd be better than spending it here alone."

Dumbledore's words came back to him, "You have friends here at Hogwarts."
"You want to spend Christmas…with me?" That was a strange thought. Having a family to spend Christmas with.

"Yes!" That boy…sometimes Derrick felt like shaking him. He didn't know what had happened in his past to make him think he wasn't wanted but he was going to fix it.

"And your mum, she wouldn't-?"

"No, now come on. We only have til tmorrow morning to get you on that list." Derrick began to walk ahead, his strides easily doubling Harry's own. "Fair warning, Nate'll probably be over after Christmas. He likes to go down and watch the football game. I live in Manchester you see. Unfortunately, United is playing away and so we're stuck with watching City."

Derrick continued walking to Flitwick's office leaving Harry dumbstruck. He was going to spend Christmas with his friend, with an actual family. It was such a foreign thought that he couldn't properly process.

"You coming, Harry?" Derrick shouted over his shoulder.

Merlin, yes, yes he was coming! Harry raced him to Flitwick's office to put him on the list for the Hogwarts Express.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Harry makes friends!

Spending the holiday with Derrick was amazing. Harry, who had never known a mother’s anything, was quickly accepted into the Hopkins’ household. He found he wasn’t immune to her scolding, especially when Nate finally came over and dragged him into their shenanigans. But she was also kind and loving, everything Harry wished a mother to be…knew his mother would’ve been. He even got presents from his friends! Derrick’s words must’ve hit something in a few of them because he wasn’t expecting anything, what with them thinking him the Heir of Slytherin and all. He was almost sad to be going back to Hogwarts.

N.E.W.T.’s were coming upon them fast and he’d heard Mrs. Hopkins say more than once how Derrick needed to spend more time studying. So he knew their time together would be limited once they got back to school.

Sadly, not everyone seemed to get the memo.

The distance didn’t do anything to shake the suspicion off Harry. The whispers followed him around more especially with Peeves gallivanting around with his favorite song. Even the Weasley Twins were getting in on the action. Whenever they saw him in the corridors they would loudly proclaim and make gestures, “Make way for Slytherin’s Heir! Seriously evil busy to attend to.”

He knew they were only joking but the rest of the school wasn’t. Though he did end up making a new friend unintentionally, and unwillingly he might add. He had intercepted Malfoy and his gang attacking Hermione Granger only a week into the new term.

“Daddy didn’t get you the toy you wanted Malfoy? Or did he finally find out about the Dueling Club and how I humiliated you in front of the entire school twice?” His voice was vicious as he approached the Malfoy heir. The reminder of the failed Dueling Club turned the boys’ cheeks red in anger and embarrassment.

His father had heard about that and made his displeasure known.

“Back off Potter; this doesn’t concern you.”

Harry’s eyes flashed in amusement as he took in the shifting forms of Crabbe and Goyle.

“See, it kinda does.” He started walking closer to the four, wand held loosely at his side. “Granger here happens to be my Transfiguration partner and we have an assignment do next week.”

Brown eyes found his in confusion and suspicion.

“Also,” his wand moved up, not threateningly but enough for them to get the point, “I’m tired of your slimy rat face strutting about as if you own the place.”

Malfoy’s eyes shifted to Harry’s wand, almost in debate. Harry was curious what he would choice. Hurting a Slytherin’s pride was always a sure way to retaliation but did Malfoy have enough
common sense to realize he was outplayed. Was he willing to wound his pride further?

Just as Harry was beginning to think Malfoy would really challenge him again, the blond moved away, not an acknowledgement of defeat but as close to one he would get.

Looks like he did have some self-preservation in there somewhere.

“This isn’t the end Potter! I’ll get you and your mudblood!”

Harry watched as Malfoy ran away to the dungeons, his two cronies following closely behind. Strangely, even retreating, Malfoy managed to look dignified.

The corridor was mysteriously empty being the middle of the afternoon so it must’ve been an opportune moment they found Granger by herself away from everyone. Watching them retreat, Harry wondered why he had come to Granger’s defense. It’s not like they were friends or even talked to each other. Hell, the last time they spoke was at the Dueling Club and it wasn’t exactly a nice conversation they had.

Well, she wasn’t that bad, Harry had to admit. Okay, so she was a know-it-all and made everyone around her feel inferior but she was an outstanding witch. He had seen her spell work. You could learn anything but actually executing it took talent.

A meek voice, mixed with accusation, spoke up from behind him, “Why did you lie to him? We are not partners and Professor McGonagall didn’t assign a group project.”

Harry turned to her once he was sure the three Slytherins were gone, realizing how out of character this was for him. Ryan would get a laugh out of this. He was always telling him to stick up for himself.

“Um…well, it’s Malfoy.” He shrugged, like that was explanation enough.

Intelligent eyes stared him down, not taking that excuse. “But you don’t like me. You’ve made that clear.” She sniffed, daring him to say different.

He felt an air of awkwardness drape over them. Well, she wasn’t wrong, he didn’t care for her attitude but he had never gone out of his way to be mean.

“Um…it’s not like you’ve exactly been friendly either.” Harry shrugged, eyes shifting to the suit of armor behind the Gryffindor. He heard a huff and resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

It was a tense few seconds as neither one of them spoke. The ringing of the school bell broke the silence, sparing each other a brief look, they collected their belongings and made their way to class which happened to be Transfiguration. Walking into class together, with no verbal communication, they sat next to each other in the front of the class. A few classmates spared them a confused glance but nothing more as Professor McGonagall tapped her wand, beginning lecture.

“For this period, I want you to pair up. I want a report on a transfiguration spell of your choice and how you might use it or combined it with another spell. I expect your report to be 36in. minimum. You have the class period to talk over spells and ideas. I want your group and spell finalize by the end of the period.” McGonagall’s stern voice cut through the classroom, with students rushing to get their friends as partners.

Hermione turned to look at Harry in astonishment, mouth slightly opened. “How’d you know?”

Harry couldn’t hide his smile but he didn’t answer her question, instead he asked his own, “So, do
you want to try a cognitive vanishment spell on a Snitch? I’ve been thinking about it for a while and they’ll need to be other spells weaved into it but I think it could be done.” His voice pitched towards the end in his excitement. Quidditch matches would be so much more interesting if the Snitch could vanish.

Hermione, it seemed, didn’t share his thoughts. “And what would the point be? The Snitch is already hard to locate, why would anyone want it to vanish as well?” Harry didn’t look too disappointed at the denial of his project as Hermione continued. “If we go off the same thought… what if we looked at timing a transfiguration? Delay the spell or prolong it? Most witches and wizards just focus on the results of their magic and the transfiguration is spontaneous but what if we focus on the magic to control when it activates?”

That seemed like a good idea. Timing of the spell wasn’t something he thought of when casting. He just wanted it to work right at that moment.

“So it’d be like a bomb?”

Hermione drew out a piece of blank parchment and started to scribble down various words and images.

“How you duel, yes.” Harry took that as a compliment. “Going from a defensive stand point, you could cast a transfiguration spell to animate an object but not have it animate until an attack.”

“Like a sneak attack? The magic is already woven into the object but just waiting to activate.” Hermione was still writing as Harry continued. “So we’d need a time charm to use in conjunction.”

She hummed and Harry couldn’t tell if it was in agreement or not. “So we’re in agreement? This will be our research topic.”

It wasn’t even a question as she was already making her way to Professor McGonagall with the piece of parchment she had been writing on.

“Here, professor. You’ll find an outline of our topic with a hypothesis and the advantage of such collaborative spell work.”

Harry stood back in momentary disbelief; she had written that up during their brief discussion? He watched as the stern professor’s eyes skimmed the paper before they turned to study the two of them.

“This is very advanced magic, animating an inanimate object won’t even be taught until next year.” Harry stood next to Hermione, determination on both their faces. McGonagall’s gaze shifted to something akin to pride as she took them in, “But if anyone can accomplish this, it is the two of you: Mr. Potter, Miss Granger.”

Identical grins took over their face at the approval and confidence she had in them.

And somehow, at the end of the day, a Ravenclaw and a Gryffindor became friends. It was an odd pairing but many would concede that they worked well together, brought out the best in one another.

///

Without him wanting it, Hermione became one of his closest friends. He had pegged her wrong, while she was a know-it-all, she was also kind and brave and really looked out for him. She was a good friend and Derrick and Nate were glad he was making friends his own age. With Hermione,
that doubled his count to…two friends his age. Well friends that still talked to him.

Beggars can’t be choosers. They would be gone next year and they needed to make sure Harry had people looking out for him.

Hermione pushed Harry to excel in classes. While he was the top in Defense, he was only in the top ten for his other classes (excluding Potions but no one counted that). Hermione pushed him to research more. While his strength was in practical spell work, he still needed to work in theoretical elements. After only a handful of weeks of friendship, Harry was already seeing the fruits of their labor. His marks were coming back with Outstanding 9.5/10 times.

Their friendship didn’t only benefit Harry. Hermione found herself spending time with the Ravenclaw Seventh Years, coming more and more out of her shell. Emily took a shine to the girl and gave her advice on how to stick up for herself, showing her a few jinxes and how to throw a punch.

The drawback came in the form of a few Gryffindor’s who didn’t like that one of their own was associating with the supposed ‘Heir of Slytherin’. The memory of his dual with Malfoy stopped people from attacking him outright but they still heard the whispers.

What was surprising was the reflexes of Hermione to defend him. A few student were sent to the Hospital Wing from her nasty spell work, not that anyone believed them when they said who attacked them.

“Am I really a bad influence on you?” Harry questioned after the third student was sent to the Hospital Wing.

A pleasant smile crossed Hermione’s face, her large front teeth on display, “The library is only where I spend half my time, Harry. Besides, books and cleverness…there are more important things – friendship and bravery…” A wistful smile graced her features now, her hand bringing his close to empathize just how much she valued him. Her willingness to break the rules just one part of it.

///

Valentines Day brought about another unsuspecting turn of events for Harry. Only Lockhart could create such fanfare out of such a useless holiday. The dwarfs were downright annoying especially on their day off. They were barging into the library, tracking down people in the snow outside, finding people in the bathroom, and generally just causing havoc. The worst part…someone had decided to write him a poem!

He was with the rest of the Quidditch team during lunch discussing their recent practice and some of the issues they had encountered.

An unattractive grunt took their attention. It was one of the dwarfs in an ugly pink tutu, an unpleasant look marring his face. “One of you Harry Potter?”

Harry moved to deny but he was too slow.

“Yes, yes, he’s right here!” Ryan ‘helpfully’ patted the second year on the back. The rest of the team didn’t even bother to hide their shit-eating grins at his misfortune and imminent embarrassment.

Harry moved to bolt but he was violently pushed back onto the bench as the dwarf cleared his throat. And so began the most humiliating 15 seconds of his life.
"His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,
His hair is as dark as a blackboard.
I wish he was mine, he's truly divine,
The hero who conquered the Dark Lord."

Laughter rang out from not only his teammates but the entire Great Hall.

Harry could feel his face a light, warmth spreading down his neck in utter embarrassment. All around him he could hear the laughter and snickers. Throwing his friends a betrayed look, he grabbed his things and stormed off, laughter and pointing following him.

///

“Harry?” A quiet, unsure voice addressed him. “Are you okay?”

“Perfectly fine! Who wouldn’t be after being completely humiliated in front of the entire school!?” Harry sarcastically sniped. “Like they needed one more thing about me to talk about.”

Ginny hid a wince. It hadn’t been her intention to embarrass Harry. It actually hadn’t been her intention for the poem to be read in front of people. She thought it could be a joke between them, something to lift his spirits up. Obviously, that blew up in her face.

Looking at him, she could see the rumors were starting to take their toll. It had been close to two months since the Dueling Club incident and the school hasn’t stopped talking about Harry since. Honestly, there were more interesting things going on beside Harry supposedly attacking people.

She walked forward a bit, not sure if Harry would lash out, and gently placed her small hand on his shaking shoulder.

“I’m sorry.” She apologized putting as much sincerity as she could in those two words because she truly was, from the bottom of her heart, sorry. The last thing she ever wanted to do was cause him more pain.

Harry turned around, eyes that were definitely not moist, attempting to glare at her.

“Sorry doesn’t stop people from talking!”

Ginny scoffed, “Since when have you cared what people thought?” Remembering the train ride at the beginning of the year and him kindly befriending a lonely first year whose brothers had abandoned her.

Harry looked at her in betrayed fury. What had he done to her to deserve this? He had tried to be her friend, left her alone when she clearly didn’t want to be friends anymore. What had he done?

They stared at each other for a while longer.

“I can make a better poem if you want –

The Boy-Who-Lived, what a daring title,
He far exceeded my imagined idol,
His eyes were kind, I hoped he’d be mine,
“Okay, okay. I get it, just please stop with the poems.” Harry let out a long suffering groan as he stuffed his fingers into his ears.

“Are you sure??” Ginny smirked as she stepped closer. “I have about a dozen more where that came from.”

She was picking on him, glad that the tension from before had dissolved.

“Please, whatever you do Ginny, do not go into poetry!” Harry begged her, unable to keep the smile off his face no matter how hard he tried.

She poked at him good naturedly before becoming serious. “I truly didn’t mean for it to happen like that. You forgive me?”

Being mad at Ginny was proving to be an impossible feat. Somehow, someway, he kept falling right back into her gravity. She was like a morning sun, bright and comforting, something you both dreaded and anticipated each morning.

“It’s alright I s’ppose. Can you just, get your brothers to stop declaring me Slytherin’s Heir?” He pleaded almost desperately. Her brothers were a nightmare, between stalking him at night and declaring him heir during the day, they were driving him insane!

Her brothers, now they she could deal with. Picking up his bag, Ginny moved to Harry’s side, playfully nudging him to get a move on. “Fred and George talk about you a lot actually. Apparently you disappear at night, said they sent Flich to find you a few times but he came back empty handed.”

Harry grabbed his bag back from her as they made their way out of the corridor. “They got me three weeks of detention last year! With Filch!”

“They’re not so bad.” Ginny tried to defend her brothers but she knew firsthand how they could be.

“And how are they everywhere!?” Harry waves his arm without his bag to highlight his point. “They just pop up –!”

“Hiya Harry.” A twin popped out of nowhere.

Harry and Ginny jumped back in shock.

“Heard ya talking bout us. All good I hope? Don’t wanna get on the bad side of the Heir of Slytherin.” The other twin wasn’t far behind.

They seemed to box the duo in even though there was only two of them as well.

“Not corrupting our innocent little sister, are we?”

“I hope not, Fred. We might need a bit of a chat if he were.”

Identical grins spread across their face as they moved around the two like predators stalking their prey.

“I don’t know George. If Gin’s poetry doesn’t scare him off, what shot do we have?”

“Quite right Fred. Quite right.”
Harry had a hard time following the conversation going on in front of him. It went from one twin to the other seamlessly, almost as if they were reading each other’s mind.

Ginny knew the twins loved this game. Confusing a person so much they had no idea what was going on anymore.

“Cut it out, Fred,” she addressed the twin on the right before addressing the one on the left, “George.”

Pouts replaced their smirks at their little sister ruining their fun.

“No need to become our charming brother-.”

“Prefect Prat.”

The two departed, fun soiled, looking for a new target. Ginny looked to Harry, ready to apologize for her brothers.

“Wicked!” Harry breathed when he finally registered what just happened.

///
His friendship with Ginny took off faster than anyone could realize. While Hermione was his friend, there were just things he couldn't talk to her about. She was very uptight and believed that he spent too much time focusing on Quidditch. Ginny was the opposite. With her, the two could go on for hours on Quidditch strategy and teams. Since he was still new to the Quidditch field, she lent him her copy of the most recent Quidditch magazine, the cover featuring the Holyhead Harpies, the best team in the league, as quoted by Ginny.

"One day I'm going to play for them." Her dreamy voice making Harry smile. He had no doubt that she would, one day, play professional Quidditch. They had been to the pitch a few times where he lent her him Nimbus 2000. Boy, could she fly! While not as adventurous as him, she could still handle a broomstick.

"Just remember us commoners when you become a Quidditch star." Harry joked, holding out the magazine imitating a fan. "Oh please, Weasley! Can I have your autograph!? You're amazing! Will you marry me!"

Ginny flushed deep red, pushing Harry off his chair as laughter bubbled out of his chest.

"What's this? Proposing to a blood traitor?" the familiar drawl of Malfoy reached their ears, instantly ruining the mood. "She must have something to offer, seeing her family's lack of fortune. I imagine your family goes hungry with so many mouths to feed."

Malfoy turned his sneer to Harry, looking him over, "And here I thought you and the mudblood were quite close. Too bad, I suppose she'll have to earn her keep another way." He said suggestively, fully aware the two knew what he was implying.

Burning with anger, Harry pulled out his wand, intent on teaching Malfoy a lesson again, his temper running on a thin rope for the past few weeks. He was beaten to it by Ginny who hit the blond with her Bat-Bogey Hex. A content smirk crossed his features as he watched the Slytherin flail and swat at the boogies.

Ginny stood there proudly, marveling at her handy work. She had gotten quite good at the hex, if she said so.

Their enjoyment was short lived as the dreaded voice of their nightmares rose above Malfoy's screams.

"Potter! Weasley!" Snape barked, black cloak billowing behind him as his stride brought him closer to the trio. "Hexing a fellow student? Detention for a week." His wand barely flickered as he canceled the hex on Malfoy. "10 points from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw."

Harry could tell the Potion's Professor was taking an unhealthy amount of glee from his punishment. Biting his lip in frustration, he grabbed Ginny's hand, intent on putting as much distance between them and the slimy bat as possible.

"Make that another week Potter, for disrespecting a professor." Ginny hand tightened in his, willing him not to take the bait. "Report tonight to my office and don't bother bring your wand, you'll be doing muggle work."
Merlin, he hated Snape, hated him more than he ever hated anyone else. The man was always taking any chance he got to belittle him with insults about his intelligence, his father, his arrogance, his friends. It was a personal vendetta and Harry didn't know what he had done to earn such a wrath. The man had been dogging his steps ever since his first potion's class.

What made it worse was that Hermione didn't believe him about Snape. Since she didn't have potions with him, it was hard for her to believe that Snape was a bad as he claimed. Sure, she would admit, he criticizes student's works almost unfairly but he was only trying to better his students. Her thoughts would turn to her fellow Gryffindor, Neville Longbottom, who couldn't make it an entire class without melting a cauldron or exploding his potion. Not even his grade of Acceptable in his class could convince her of his unfair treatment. Which was ridiculous seeing as his potions were 95% perfect and Derrick and Nate, seventh years NEWT students, corrected his assignments. Hermione was adamant that it was something Harry himself was doing wrong.

"He's not worth it Harry." Ginny murmured as she continued to drag him away. "Malfoy knows he can't win without Snape fighting his battles; bloody coward."

And that was why he adored Ginny. She was brutally honest and he knew if she wasn't pulling him out of danger, she was right there in it beside him. She was under no illusion of the kind of man Snape was, her brothers having told her countless stories about him during their Hogwarts years.

They were a floor away when Harry groaned in frustration as he finally put together what had just happened. He wanted to bang him head on the nearest wall, hoping the stone would take away his problems.

"Ravenclaw against Slytherin is in two weeks!" That bloody bastard had played them! Malfoy must've purposely sought him out so Snape could give him detention.

Equally outraged brown eyes met his. "Go to Professor Flitwick! He can't get away with this!"

Harry shook his head. He had long ago sworn that he wouldn't go to his head of house about Snape. He was his problem.

"Then I will!" her voice full of rightful indignation. "I'll tell him that it was my fault, that you had nothing to do with it!"

Harry couldn't miss the Quidditch match, he just couldn't. It was the one thing he was looking forward to, had been looking forward to for months. The chance to wipe the arrogant smirk off Malfoy's face was too good to pass up.

If he were being honest, Harry was very glad Ginny was his friend and not his enemy as her wrath was terrifying. She was only a first year and she already had quite a range of hexes under her belt.

He bit his lip in frustration and his nail dug crescent marks into his palm. He could let Ginny take the fall for this but he couldn't miss the match. It was a lose-lose for him. Tears of frustration slipped pass that night as he struggled to go to sleep, his hands raw from cauldron scrubbing with knees equally as sore. None of this was fair!

Ginny did go behind his back to Professor Flitwick to confess her crime, adding that Harry hadn't done anything. The Charm's Professor expressed his disappoint in her, informing her that McGonagall would be made aware of the situation and that he would talk to Snape about Harry's detention.
Outnumbered, Snape grudgingly receded the two week detention of Harry's, instead, adding a week to Ginny's punishment.

Ginny wasn't even mad. It was worth it as long as Harry got to play.

Harry didn't know how to thank her as he enveloped her into a hug when Professor Flitwick told him the news the next morning. It was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for him.

"You better win, I'm not doing this just for you." Ginny smiled, ignoring her brothers across the hall, "If you beat Slytherin, that puts Gryffindor one step closer to the Quidditch Cup."

It was the most anticipated game, everyone looking forward to the two seekers facing off. Potter vs Malfoy. To those keeping track the current score in their rivalry was 1-0 in Potter's favor. Malfoy had a chance of evening it up if he caught the Snitch. There was more than the game at stake, something that was quietly whispered through the halls as the Weasley Twins took bets on the match. Some thought it would be the climax of the power struggle between the two boys. Many believed that Malfoy would catch the snitch, having the superior broom but those who had paid attention to the rumors and the first Ravenclaw game, realized that Potter was quite talented on a broom.

Hermione huffed at the illegal gambling taking place, quite unhappy about all the fuss over a silly game. In her opinion, there were much better things to be done than flying around after balls.

"You only say that because you fell off your broom last year." Harry teased as Hermione complained about the noise in the Gryffindor Common Room with three days remaining till the game.

"That is simply not true! I just believe that you could find a better way to use your time." Her voice dropped to a whisper as she leaned in, "Like discovering what that voice is."

Harry regretted telling Hermione about that bit of information. She had been pestering him nonstop about his since he told her two days ago. Honestly, he didn't care at the moment. There hadn't been an attack in months and the school was finally getting tired of thinking he was the heir. A few students had even come up to apologize and wish him luck in the upcoming match.

"I already told you Hermione; I haven't heard it in months and nothing's happened. The heir probably got cold feet." It was wishful thinking but life was becoming bearable and he had enough on his plate to worry about without a voice that only he could hear.

Hermione wasn't letting it go though. "Don't you think it a bit odd? That only you can hear this voice? A voice that only appears when there's an attack."

Yes, he thought it weird and disturbing but he had long ago attributed it to the monster being a snake and it being the beast of Slytherin made it 100% possible.

"We've been over this already and Professor Dumbledore clearly doesn't think it can help since he hasn't said anything." The Headmaster had been silent since their conversation before break, not that he was looking forward to any conversation with the wizard seeing as all their interactions had come after an attack.

Hermione bit her lip, if the Headmaster didn't think it could help, who was she to argue. But she believed it to be important. The fact that Harry could follow the voice, understand it…it was part of a larger puzzle.

"Who do you think it is? The Heir?" Hermione was curious. It had to be a Slytherin and it had to be
a pureblood. But most of Slytherin were purebloods. "Could it be Malfoy?"

He did fit the profile and the attacks seemed to stop around the time Harry bested him at the Dueling Club.

Harry had given this some thought over the months but he wasn't familiar enough with the students to make an accurate speculation. But he knew one thing for sure –

"It's definitely not Malfoy. He wouldn't be able to hold that secret if his life depended on it. He also didn't understand Parseltongue."

Harry knew enough about Malfoy to know that the boy wasn't the Heir of Slytherin.

"Well surely he would know who?"

Unlikely as well. Malfoy wasn't hanging around anyone new this year, keeping to his year mates and a few on the Quidditch Team.

"Just trust me, it's not Malfoy." He stretched his back, a cramp setting in from sitting too long. They had been studying for the last three hours, Hermione already beginning her revising schedule while Harry was researching his classes for next year. He already had a general idea of what he wanted to take but he figured it wouldn't hurt to look up a few books to make sure.

Hermione was lost, a feeling she wasn't used to and didn't like.

"What does Ginny think?"

The third member of their group was currently serving Day 7 of her two week detention.

Harry shrugged, letting his head fall back. "I d'know. We don't really talk about it. Creevey wasn't really a friend but he was in her classes." Seeing her about to ask no doubt another related question, Harry cut her off, "Look, can we talk about something else? Like our classes for next year."

That seemed to do the trick. Hermione's eyes brightened up in excitement. "Oh, everything just sounds so fascinating. I can't possibly narrow it down."

He stared at her, not quite in disbelief. "You're a muggleborn Hermione. Why would you need to take Muggle Studies?"

"Wizards have a different view of muggles. It will be interesting to see the muggle world from their point of view." She defended herself.

"Yeah, maybe they can explain how your relatives can drop you off at an orphanage no questions asked." Harry spit out bitterly.

Hermione winced. Harry rarely talked about his past and she knew there were many skeletons that he kept buried. His aunt and uncle were one of those. She hesitated to broach the subject, not wanting her friend to close her out.

"Have you, have you ever talked to anyone about that? I mean –." She had messed up. His head came forward, shadowed as he picked up his books from the table. "Harry, please!" She begged him to come back.

Putting his bag on his shoulder and the stack of book levitating behind him, Harry began his retreat to the exit.
Hermione pushed out of her seat, intent on following him. "Harry! If you would just –."

He whipped around, eyes blazing, "It's my life, alright? I don't need people to feel sorry for me or or look at me like you are. My family didn't want me, I'm over it."

He shrugged it off like it wasn't a heavy burden, like it didn't eat him up every time he thought about it.

Hermione moved to argue against his claim; he most certainly was not over it!

"Harry!" A familiar voice called out, grabbing the two second years' attention.

Derrick jogged up to them, dressed in his practice robes.

"'Ello Hermione." Derrick was always polite to her, something she really liked about the older boy. He turned his attention back to his seeker. "I booked a last minute practice. It's supposed to rain Saturday and this is our only chance to practice in similar conditions."

It had been raining all afternoon, not looking to stop anytime soon.

Seeing his escape, Harry bid Hermione farewell and took off with his captain to the pitch, not looking forward to the next hour but wanting to be anywhere but here.

/  

Saturday arrived and unlike his first game, Harry held no nerves. His confidence was at an all-time high as he ate breakfast and chatted with the others. Their practice had went off with zero hiccups and they were prepared for the stormy weather that was beginning to pick up outside the castle walls.

Sneers were thrown his way from the Slytherin table when his gaze wandered over that way. Honestly, he couldn't wait to humiliate them. If only Dot could hear his thoughts now. She'd give him a stern talking to about sportsmanship and being the better person.

Dorthea, or Dot as the children called her, was the stability of their life at the orphanage. Someone who put her heart on her sleeve and could do nothing as the world tore apart her wards. She tried to impart desirable qualities in them and one of those happened to be being the better person and not playing down to bullies.

Luckily she wasn't here to see her failure, Harry thought, as he sent a mocking smirk to Malfoy.

The Great Hall was bustling with energy not seen so early in the morning. It was the most active the students had been in months. Harry could just feel it in the atmosphere and it was a completely different feeling, being a player compared to an observer. People he didn't even know were coming up to him, offering good lucks and messages to thrash Slytherin. If he looked close enough, Harry could swear he saw the Weasley Twins at the center of a gambling ring, collecting money from a group of late bettors. It seemed three-fourths of the school were united in their desire to not see Slytherin win the Quidditch Cup again.

Finishing up his glass of water, Harry moved with the rest of the team as they began their march to the Quidditch Pitch.

A familiar head of bushy brown hair caught his eyes as it lingered at the entrance.

"Do well out there Harry." Hermione pulled him into a hug, wishing him luck. Harry noticed that
she had switched out her normal red and gold scarf for a silver and blue one. He felt touched at her show of support, returning her hug in earnest.

"Keep an eye for any stray Bludger!" He deadpanned as he released her, chasing after his team before she had a chance to comment.

The storm had yet to pick up any real intensity but Samuels was adamant that a severe thunderstorm was on its way.

"Aright team! I don't need to remind you how important this game is. We've practiced for this. Our Chasers are some of the best out there and our Seeker is the best spitfire this school has ever seen." Harry blushed under the praise, his goosebumps ridden body soaking up the flustered heat. "This is the last year for some of us. We've dreamed of finally sticking it to Slytherin and now is our chance. I can't make you want this but I believe in every single one of you."

Derrick locked eyes with every player, passion a lite in his blue eyes.

"Duncan, Samuels…keep those Bludgers on them. Emily, Roger…remember our formations. Ryan…do not let anything pass those hoops. And Harry…make sure you get that Snitch!"

It wasn't his best speech but it did its job. The players shared looks of determination as they grasped their respective brooms.

"- will be RAVENCLAW! Standing at 5 feet 10 inches, the roguishly good looking with brains to match…Derrick Hopkins!" Lee Jordan's familiar voice rang out as he began introducing the team as they flew out. "They make quite the pair but don't get on her bad side…Ryan Ward and Emily Brand!"

Harry tuned out the rest of Lee's introduction when he caught sight of Malfoy flying at the opposite end of the pitch. They kept each other's gaze until Madam Hooch blew the whistle and released the Snitch.

It was time for Rematch #3.

/  

"Harry Potter 'as caught the Snitch! Ravenclaw wins!" Shouts ran out throughout the stadium as the Ravenclaw team crashed into their teammate, ecstatic beyond belief. Samuels was shaking Roger whose couldn't get his smile off his face. Derrick was screaming with Ryan and Duncan, unable to believe what had just happened. And Emily was swinging Harry around in circles as he continued to clutch the Snitch.

This, Harry thought through the excitement, was the best feeling in the world.

Those doing the math realized that Ravenclaw was in the lead for the Quidditch Cup with their 270-40 win. The news began to spread across the Ravenclaw section, the volume picking up even more as they took to the pitch.

Screaming, shouts, congratulations, pats on the back, hugs, crying, and somehow Harry found himself on the shoulders of Ryan and Derrick, joy spread across his face as his entire house surrounded in.

Nothing could ruin this moment, Harry believed as he caught Malfoy snapping his broom in fury, hate burning in his eyes.
Absolutely nothing.

Harry should really learn his luck was never that good.

All celebrations stopped as McGonagall made her way onto the pitch, creating a loud bang to gather the rowdy student’s attention.

"All students are to report to their common room immediately. Prefects will be around for a headcount. If you are not present, 20 points will be deducted." Everyone stared at her in horror. They could see she was frazzled, worked up over something. If it worried the normally stern and put together McGonagall…well there was a need for them to be worried. "Mr. Potter? Mr. Potter, please step forward."

All eyes turned to Harry who was trying desperately to disappear behind Ryan. Whispers broke out on why the Transfiguration professor would want him. Looks that had previously held joy and admiration now turned to suspicion. Harry wasn't sure how the mood could change so fast.

Beckoning with her hand, McGonagall stated once one, annoyance seeping in at having to ask again. "Follow me, Mr. Potter."

Harry gathered his courage, stepping forward to follow the professor, ignoring the looks sent his way. She sent him what could only be a pitying smile.

They made their way up to the castle, Harry still in his Quidditch robes, the celebration already feeling like forever ago.

"Professor?" he asked when the entrance came into view.

She sent him another look, eyes focusing on his rain covered glasses and soaking wet robes before tutting. With a wave of her wand, Harry found his robes dry and vision clear. But that still didn't answer his question.

Her eyes seemed to soften, "You were friends with Miss Granger, am I right?"

Everyone knew they were friends; they were even partnered in Transfiguration. McGonagall knew this, he knew she knew this. Thinking about it, he hadn't seen Hermione in the celebration. There was no way she wouldn't have raced down there to congradulate him. Thinking hard, he couldn't remember seeing her in the stands either.

Gulping, he had a creeping feeling he knew what this was about.

"Hermione, she wasn't-?"

He couldn't finish his sentence because there were only two options: petrified or dead.

Professor McGonagall continued forward, back stiff in uneasiness.

"There was an attack. Miss Granger was found along with another student, Miss Clearwater. Prepare yourself, it won't be an easy sight."

They had stopped at the doors to the Hospital Wing, McGonagall letting him decide when to enter, deducing he would need a minute to gather his thoughts before he saw what had become of his friend.

Shaky hands pushed opened the wooden doors, eyes zeroing in on Madam Pomfrey hovering over
two new beds. 

He didn't know if he wanted to run over there or in the opposite direction. Their conversation from a few days ago playing on repeat in his head. His body took him to her bed, her body like a statue.

"They were found outside the Library. Do you know why she'd be there and not at the Quidditch match?"

Harry shook his head negatively. Hermione was always in the library, researching one thing or another. He could guess why though. Their conversation still playing in his head. Her brain must've connected certain pieces after he left her, that was the only reason she would miss his match.

Staring at her still form, she looked terrified but brave.

"She was found with this," McGonagall held up a mirror. "Do you know why?"

Harry shook his head negatively again. Hermione wasn't vain…as far as he knew, she didn't even own a hand mirror.

Nodding, she placed the hand mirror back on the side stand and left the boy to his silent grief.

Why was she in the library? What was the hand mirror for? Did she know she was going to be attacked? The look on her face was a rather curious one. None of the others petrified had that look, theirs being more scared and shocked. But Hermione's was different. Hers was one of determination, expectation, like she knew what was out there.

His hand traced the outline of her outstretch hand, the cold seeping into his flesh. Had she discovered what Slytherin's beast was?

/ 

Chapter End Notes

This is coming along rather nicely. Next chapter is probably what everyone is waiting for: The introduction ever everyone's favorite Slytherin!
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Harry struggles without Hermione

Chapter Notes

Ignoring my problems (read finals) I let my anxiety out by writing instead of studying. Close call last night which you might see reflected in here somewhere. I'll clear up this chapter next week after finals and hopefully have a new one ready by then as well!

Let me know what you think!

"Harry." A raw, deep voice sounded from behind him. He turned his body to look at the owner. It was Derrick. "She'll be alright. Once the draught is administered…” He spoke with a softness that had been absent only minutes earlier, when they had still been in the euphoria of their victory.

Derrick stood back, allowing Harry his privacy but showing his support the best way he knew how.

The Hospital Wing was silent, the two Ravenclaws being the only non-petrified students occupying the room. It was uncomfortable, the stillness of everything; it was wrong, like a creeping feeling hollowing out his bones. Derrick didn't like being in here.

Harry turned back to Hermione, looking her over once again, eyes shadowed, "I think she found something – she knew what was out there." He indicated to the mirror. It was his fault that she had been looking into the chamber, his fault she was in the library by herself this morning.

Derrick stepped forward cautiously, hand pausing on its' way to the second years shoulder, "Harry, it's been a long day."

"They blame me." His eyes didn't leave Hermione's, staring into the scared but fierce gaze, almost willing her to tell him what she had found. He knew the whispers that would no doubt be circulating the common rooms by now. He didn't blame them either; if he didn't know it wasn't him, he'd think he was the Heir too.

He could hear his captain swallow thickly, a sign he was unsure of his words, "Harry…"

"What if they're right? What if, somehow, I'm responsible for all this?" His voice was soft, a stark contrast to his current turmoil of feelings. How could anyone feel so conflicted?

"Listen to me: You are the last person capable of doing something like this. Flint is vile and Malfoy is an insufferable little git. And you are nothing like them!" Derrick almost spat out as he spoke of Flint, their history littered in injuries. His voice evened out as he moved to what Harry really needed to hear. "You're an idiot and I don't know how you got into Ravenclaw but you're not
a bad person. You care about people.” Derrick reached forward, ready to force the twelve year old to believe him.

That did it.

Harry threw him a look, not quite able to hold back his smile. "You're like 17 and you're starting to sound like Professor Dumbledore?"

"You should be grateful to hear wisdom as wise as mine!" A similar smile graced his face, his mission accomplished.

Harry let out a snort, his previous troubles seemingly pushed aside but not forgotten.

Derrick kept to the cheery mood as they left the Hospital Wing, under strict orders from Professor McGonagall to return to their tower. "And your flying today! That was some of the best flying I've ever seen! If we keep playing like that, we'll win the Cup for sure!"

Harry preened at the compliant. He had wanted to, and did, thoroughly humiliate Malfoy. The best part of it was that his father was there to see it! The boy had been bragging about how his Board of Governors father was going to be at the game all week.

"Yeah, that felt good." Eyes crunched up in fond remembrance.

Derrick slung his arm around Harry's shoulders, his weight causing the smaller to slightly buckle before adjusting.

"We'll need to practice longer and harder. We still have to play Gryffindor and if I know Wood, he'll have his team out doing the same."

Harry could believe that. He had seen the Gryffindor team exiting the locker rooms when they were just starting to practice in the morning. Their captain must have them out there at the crack of dawn.

"This is my last chance, so bring me home that cup Harry!" he demanded of Harry, his competitiveness and giddiness at their chance taking over.

They were the only two students in the corridors, the rest of the student body in their common rooms, so there was no one to see the slightly manic look cross both their faces.

"I'll get you the Cup but you have to take me to a Quidditch match this summer!" Harry had wanted to see a professional Quidditch match ever since he saw his first game last year, he wasn't about to waste a chance to weasel one out of his captain.

Identical grins pulled at their faces, "Deal!"

/

Ginny had been absent for the rest of the weekend, the twins saying that Hermione's attack had upset her and that she hadn't left her room. Harry could see the worry in their eyes and it did nothing to lessen his own.

Ginny was his rock, she kept him grounded from his self-doubt and in return he provided her company to chase away her silent demons.

Sunday saw the announcement that all students would be chaperoned to and from their classes and
they were follow their prefects to and from the common rooms. Groans resounded across the hall but equally as loud were the whispers of relief. Students were scared the walk the halls by themselves, paranoia running rampant, not that they could be blamed. With the professors escorting them to and from class, the chances of them getting attacked drastically fell.

At the Head Table, mixed reactions met the announcement as well. Many professors had worry etched into the face, lining every wrinkle and fold. Other's like Snape, kept their face blank, not displaying their emotion to the school. It was a good idea; if the students saw the professors were worried, it would only escalate their feelings of fear. Snape's eyes roamed the hall, studying, devouring, calculating, each student in his house, barely giving a glance to the other tables until they crossed the familiar head of messy hair.

Yes, Potter was easy to spot in a crowded room. His form just screaming for attention. From his disheveled appearance to his absent manners, Potter wasn't one his knowing eyes could pass over. Eyes that had seen into his mind, knew his thoughts, knew his anger.

The boy hated him, something that didn't bother the professor. No, what he found infinitely fascinating and all the more disturbing were the similarities and evidence pointing to the boy being the perpetrator. There was nothing extraordinary about him, riding on the coattails of fame that should long since have vanished, arrogance much like his father's. Grudgingly, even he had to admit that there was something wrong with Potter.

His ability to speak to snakes had shook his foundation, his meeting with Dumbledore providing no answers and infinity more questions. The man was hiding something, hiding or unsure of his theory. Either way, he didn't trust Snape enough to share. That night, he had seen pure hate in the boy's eyes, hated reminiscent of identical ones so long ago. Eyes that flashed from betrayal to hatred to sorrow so fast he hadn't been sure he had seen it.

It was a reminder of his lowest…no, he was lying to himself. That wasn't his lowest point but if he thought on that part of his past any longer, he'd need alcohol to get through the night.

Harry Potter was connected to these attacks and whether his was the culprit or the victim was yet to be seen.

The Sixth Year Ravenclaws were on edge come Monday morning, specifically the girls. Harry figured it was to be expected. Penelope Clearwater had been with Hermione and was sharing the bed next to the Gryffindor in the Hospital Wing. Some gave him halfhearted smile, others ignored him, while a few threw him glares. Yes, many blamed him for the attack and under irrational logic concluded that he had staged the attack to throw suspicion off him. The theory was common enough that he had heard it circulating in the Great Hall.

Barely restraining from banging his head against the table, Harry threw desperate glances to the Gryffindor table. Ginny wasn't there.

Invisibility Cloak in his bag, Harry clenched his hands to refrain from doing anything rash. He had to keep reminding himself that Ginny had lost more than one friend. It's just that there was the lingering doubt that she had finally succumb to the rumors; that she didn't want to be friends with him anymore.

It was this thought that scared him more than anything and soured what little remained of his appetite.
The Great Hall was filled with murmurings and whispered conversations. It was the most subdued anyone could ever remember it being. Even the twins wore serious faces as they talked in hushed whispers with their brothers.

"Chin up, Harry. Hermione'll be awake once the Mandrakes are ready."

Harry threw a weak, half-hearted smile that looked more like a grimace towards the speaker, Anthony. The boys had been unyielding in their defense of him, something he was immensely grateful for. Anthony, Terry, Michael, and Alec had all pledged their support of him last night, stating they believed in him. It was heartwarming, Harry managing to get the words out to thank them before burying into his sheets, face burning.

"And, I'll be your partner today, if that's alright with you?" Padma chimed in, finishing off her pumpkin juice.

With Charms and Transfiguration today and no Hermione, Harry would be by himself something Padma had realized.

"I'd like that. Thanks."

A crack of thunder sounded as lightening lit up the ceiling, rain beginning to pour. Great…they had Herbology first thing this morning.

/ 

Having a professor escort them to classes stopped most of the negative reactions Harry knew were bound to happen, reducing them to the morning and evening, when only the prefects were there as witnesses. A few brave soul managed to send jinxes his way, playing it off as him tripping over his feet. He glared, biting his lip as he collected himself, keeping his gaze determinedly forward. It didn't stop him from hearing the snickers or jeers.

Lockhart, the most oblivious professor in the castle, was escorting the group of Second Years to their last class of the evening, History of Magic. Harry could hear him going on and on about how students will one day be studying him, Gilderoy Lockhart, in their history books! How his exploits will never be rivaled and he, being the advocate for education, paused in his selfless career of saving people, to teach the poor students of Hogwarts.

Harry rolled his eyes, sharing looks with Terry and Michael who were on either side of him. If half that crap was true, Harry swore he'd drink the next potion Neville made. Teaching? The man hadn't taught them anything other than how not to hold a wand, not to let pixies out in a classroom, and that Harry definitely didn't have a future as an actor.

"Adam had a panic attack over break when he was looking over the NEWT objectives. Professor Lockhart hasn't even touched on a quarter of the content!"

Harry had met Adam, Terry's brother, once in passing. The boy had come over to wish Terry a happy birthday a few weeks back but he had heard about him from Derrick, Ryan, and Nate who were his roommates. The three hadn't taught them anything other than how not to hold a wand, not to let pixies out in a classroom, and that Harry definitely didn't have a future as an actor.

"I saw Martha Brighton break down in the library last week." Padma turned around to whisper. "I heard from Hannah, who heard from Susan, that Martha wants to be an Auror. You need top marked in DADA for that."

The four grimaced, pitying those taking their OWLS and NEWTS this year for DADA.
Harry moved to say something when his bag suddenly ripped, spilling its contents and breaking his ink well all over his belongings. He scrambled to separate his belongs, trying to salvage whatever he could. The other's glared at the passing group, Sixth Year Slytherins. A few were even brave enough to send evil smirks their way. Wankers, the lot of them.

They moved to help him but Harry waved them on, there was no point in all of them missing class. They hesitated, no one was supposed to be left alone, but his stubbornness won out. They were already out of sight of the rest of the group, alone in the corridor. It wouldn't do for all of them to get into trouble. Harry watched them go, running to catch up with the rest of the group before focusing on his belongings. Everything was covered in black ink: his homework, his notes – some of it looked presentable, like he might be able to copy them instead of completely rewriting them. His tie and cloak were littered with black spots, something Harry began to stress about. Leaving his spilled ink and gathering his belongings in his arms, he made his way to the nearest bathroom, hoping he could save the two and he wouldn't need to buy new ones.

Turning on the faucet, he viciously scrubbed at the material, black coloring the water but not disappearing from the cloth.

"Come on." He begged under his breath, "Come on."

You'd think wizard's would put ink in unbreakable jars to prevent accidents like this but noo, that would be too easy. Those slimy gits. He knew they were still bitter about the loss on Saturday. Okay, bitter wasn't a strong enough word; they were downright furious. Slytherin were essentially out of the competition with that loss, the first time in three years.

"Whaddare you doing in here?! You're not a girl!" An unholy screech sounded behind him.

Harry's head jerked up, staring in the mirror at the reflection of a ghost, a young girl in Hogwarts robes, as the water continued to flow over his hands.

"Who are you?" He'd never seen her before. Usually all the ghosts attended the Welcoming Feast.

"Of course you don't know who I am! No one ever knows who I am!"

Okay…he could totally find a new bathroom, one not haunted by a crazy ghost. He bent to pick up his bag, slowly…very slowly.

"Why should anyone know poor, miserable, moping, moaning Myrtle?"

Harry paused in gathering his things. Wait, why did that sound familiar? Myrtle? He'd heard that name before, in a book. Thinking hard, it came to him where he had read it.

"Myrtle Warren? The girl who died when the chamber was last open?" Coming by that information had been difficult and a complete accident. Most of the books with information on the chamber opening in the 40's lacked detailed information on the event. All that was said was that a girl, Myrtle Warren, was killed in a freak accident. It looked like the Governors were trying to cover the whole thing up but there were school newspaper clippings from that time that detailed the petrifications. It wasn't hard to put two and two together.

The girl did a compete 180. Zooming into his face, Harry backed up into the sink, his wet hands gripping the porcelain to maintain his balance. "Huh? You have heard of me!?!" She demanded, not caring for personal space.

Harry flinched, feeling his body begin to chill at her contact. He nodded his head only a bit, trying to maintain a distance from the cold, "In a book. It said you were the only casualty of the chamber
being opened in 1943."

"Oh, it was awful. Do you want to hear how I died?" Harry cringed. She seemed a little too eager to talk about her death. Moving around the sink, he tried to get away from the girl as politely as possible. Frankly, he wasn't sure she was completely sane; who sounded that happy about their death?

"…er…Maybe later, I'm actually late for class." He'd maneuvered enough so that his back was to the door, ready to bolt when his eyes caught something in one of the stalls. Nothing else mattered for some reason. The book drew him in as if everything else was blurred and it was the only clarity he could see. Walking pass Myrtle, he crouched down to inspect the curious object. It wasn't anything special though, just a diary. He was moving to pick it up and flick through it when he finally heard Myrtle speak again.

"It's been laying there since yesterday when someone threw it at me." She sniffled, her simpering voice really getting on his nerves.

Why did it matter? It's not like it hurt her or anything, it'd just pass through her. Harry held his tongue though, he had a feeling Myrtle wouldn't take kindly to that.

Huh, it was blank except for a name: T.M. Riddle.

The name felt familiar as though it should mean something to him. It was almost like Riddle was a friend he'd had when he was very small, and he had half-forgotten. Pocketing it, he promised to look at it later. If nothing else, he got another notebook since his old one only had two pages left.

He left the bathroom feeling lighter, like he had found something he had been looking for. He slipped into History of Magic with half an hour left, waving off unasked questions before turning to page 717.

/ 

Between the Slytherins and the rest of the school that thought him the heir, Harry knew he would be lucky if he ended the week with nothing more than a ripped bag. During dinner, another jinx was shot at him and Astronomy saw him barely avoiding a nasty fall down the stairs when a tripping jinx hit him in the back. It was a relief to sink into his bed, comforter pulled up under his chin as he chased sleep, blocking out the memories of the day.

The next day saw his worst Potions class to date. Double Potions and Snape were never a good combination and Harry knew the man was brimming in anger. Ever since he had gotten out of the detention over a fortnight ago, the man had been almost belligerent. Harry heard he made a handful of first years cry the other day.

Walking into the classroom, he could already feel those black, empty eyes trailing him as he found his seat near the back. It was like something crawling at his skin, itching right below the surface. He ignored it the best he could, not wanting to give the man the satisfaction that he was unnerved. He imagined cold breath ghosting over his shoulder, touching his ear. He turned to Michael, curious if anyone else felt it. Michael shook his head negatively, turning his head quickly back to his station as the devil swooped in.

"I asked for no talking, Mr. Potter. Obviously, you feel yourself above following such directions. Need I remind you that while easy enough for even a dudderhead like yourself, the Draught of Sprachen, if brewed incorrectly, will leave you speaking gibberish for the rest of your unfortunate life, however long that may be." The man towered over Harry, his body seeming to grow the longer
he spoke, almost shrouding him in darkness. Just the way Snape talked made you feel like you were pathetic as he claimed. "Do. You. Understand."

Each word punctured out, the question not even a question. There was only one answer. Two words, he needed to hear before he went back on the prowl, "Yes, sir." He managed to grit out.

Satisfied, Snape carried on, finding a new victim in Ernie.

Harry laid his throbbing head in his hand, willing away the headache as he concentrated on finishing his potion.

He flicked through his potions textbook, creasing pages that looked interesting as he wait for the temperature to rise.

That was his first mistake, exhibiting his incompetence, according to the resident professor.

His potion exploded quite suddenly, drenching him and the unfortunate person in front of him who happened to be Padma.

Snape was on him in a heartbeat, dragging him from his chair by his collar, thrusting him to the door but not before giving him another zero, taking 30 points, and assigning him a two foot essay on why his potion went wrong, due next class which happened to be Friday.

At the rate Snape was giving him zeros, Harry knew he’d be lucky to pass Potions with anything greater than an Acceptable.

He did feel bad about Padma but was thankful his potion had almost been done. The incomplete potion's only side-effect was that the user could only talk in their second language or a language they had some knowledge of.

Harry chose not to talk for the next four hours when nothing but hisses escaped his mouth. Padma was stuck speaking Hindu, meaning she stuck with Parvati for the remainder of the day. McGonagall was sympathetic but not enough to excuse him from class.

The unfortunate part of Parseltongue was that he couldn't tell when he was speaking it. It sounded like English to him. The looks from the class when he spoke told him exactly what he was speaking, leading to his voluntary muteness.

With the bell, he made his escape, Invisibility Cloak hiding him before the next person entered the hallway.

/  

There was only so much the body and mind could take. His headache intensified, almost like his brain was being mashed. His palmed pushing into his eyeballs, creating black spots behind his eyelids, did nothing to help. Sleep eluded him as he tossed and turned, blankets pushed around in a constant effort to get comfortable. With a huff of frustration that threatened to turn to tears, Harry finally gave up, crossing his legs, head cradled in hands that tugged at his hair. He just wanted to sleep!

He drifted off into a light sleep hours later, waking with the first light of sun.

His chest hurt, reminiscent of the time Dudley thought it'd been funny to turn Harry into his personal chair.
School just wasn't an option today. Taking his bag, he retreated to the fourth floor where he knew an isolated study area was located. No one there to bother him.

He missed Hermione terrible. He hadn't realized just how essential she had become. It was especially apparent with the absence of Ginny. He hadn't seen her since Saturday morning before she left for detention. After weeks of their near constant presence in his life, the hole was apparent, Harry thought as he pulled out his journal.

Flipping it open, the writing on the last page reminded him that he had filled it up with his reading on the preservation charm after classes on Tuesday. He had been lucky that day. The journal had been wrapped in his cloak, avoiding major damage. Flipping through it, he sighed. Some pages were unsalvageable. It's not that he couldn't buy a new one, it was the face the book was like his life. He put his thoughts in here, his research musings, and observations. And now part of it was ruined.

Placing the worn notebook back in his bag, he pulled out book that hadn't left his bag since he found it.

Holding it in his hand, Harry shook off the discomfort of using another's journal. It's not like this Riddle person had used it or even went here anyone. The date on the back was indication enough of how old it was.

Grabbing a writing utensil, his hand accidentally knocked his potion's book into view.

Harry glared at it, willing it to set fire. He didn't even know how he was going to write a two foot essay on why his potion exploded yesterday because he had done everything correctly! It wasn't fair and he knew Snape knew that.

This is ridiculous! Snape knows I did that potion perfectly! I don't know WHY it exploded. He's just pissed I beat Malfoy and got one over him even though they both cheated.

If I could I'd totally put a Filibuster in his office —. Greasy haired bastard.

I want to
I need to
this
I can't even think straight!
And I can't find Ginny. It's like

Harry stopped writing abruptly as he noticed his earlier writing begin to disappear.

Wha-?

His hand moved over the aged parchment in confusion, previous anger evaporating. There was nothing there! No indication that he had even written anything! He flipped through the pages, looking for anything...nothing! Was this a trick item, something from a joke shop?

He flipped back to the first page and instead of finding nothing there was writing but not his!

"Hello. Who, may I ask, is writing in my diary?"

Harry stared at it in shock as the ink faded back into the book. This had to be a joke item or something cursed...books just don't write back to you! Harry struggled for a few seconds, debating whether he should close the book and discard it like the previous owner or keep it and write back.

"Are you still there?"

The writing was back. His curiosity won out.
"My name is Harry Potter. Are you T.M. Riddle?"

There was nothing wrong giving out his name, most people knew it anyway.

"Most people call me Tom, but yes, I am T.M. Riddle."

Damn, Harry was jealous of this person's handwriting. It was elegant and neat, similar to what one would see from centuries ago. Harry thought of his rapid scrawl and felt a hint of embarrassment and slightly inferior compared to this Tom Riddle. Which was ridiculous really! It was just handwriting…many people had bad handwriting.

"I would advise against placing anything pyrotechnic in a potions laboratory. Certain ingredients are combustible and I would hate for you to risk the ire of this Professor Snape any further."

How did he-? Right, his writing from earlier.

"I know that but he's such a horrid professor! My potions are near perfect every class yet he always docks points or insults me. And yesterday I did everything exactly as the book said and somehow it exploded! He didn't even give me a chance to explain. Gave me a zero and assigned me a two foot essay on what I did wrong, due tomorrow!"

"He sounds like an unpleasant professor. What potion were you brewing, if I may ask?"

"It was the Draught of Sprachen."

The writing was appearing faster as their conversation picked up. They were already halfway down the first page.

"The Draught of Tongues? Not a single one of those ingredients should cause an explosion. Any competent Potion's Master can discern that your potion was compromised by an external ingredient!"

It was as if Tom was sitting with him; Harry could sense the indignance on his behalf and it made him smile.

"If I said that to his face, I swear he'd murder me."

Harry took a moment of silence as he collected his thoughts. It was therapeutic to be able to freely rant about his least favorite professor. But this also brought him back to the book and how exactly it worked.

"How are you writing in this? Where are you now?"

It took a little longer for a reply.

"I am a memory, preserved in a diary. It was a project of mine during my school years."

"Like a pensieve?"

He had read about them in passing earlier in the year when he grabbed one of Nate's Ancient Rune's books to flip through.

"Similar, yes, but not limited by the constraint of an actual memory. With a pensieve, one is limited to what is contained within an individual's memory. I created a physical, conscious form of my sixteen year-old self. Everything I knew up until the moment I fashioned this diary is accessible to me and those I desire."
That…this…was an amazing piece of magic and very advanced. The charms alone were probably N.E.W.T. level not including the proper understanding of animating an object. Harry told him as much.

"Is this diary really from 1942?"

Harry had noticed the faded year on the cover and found it curious. Tom's handwriting began to scribble across the page gathering Harry's interest.

"Yes, it was my diary while I was at school. What year is it currently?"

"It's February 1993." Harry didn't wait for a response before he began writing again. "If that's true you were here when the Chamber of Secrets was opened last!"

He was finally getting answers! If he could find out who opened the chamber, how they were caught…he could finally clear his name…convince the Headmaster to let him stay…

"Yes, I was attending Hogwarts when the Chamber of Secrets was opened." Harry held his breath, "I was actually the one to catch the heir."

Hope blossomed in his chest, threatening to burst forth.
“HARRY POTTER!!” a voice shouted out, scaring Harry to his very core. Jumping in shock, he scrambled to hide the diary, covering it with his potion’s assignment.

“Gin-Ginny?” he stuttered out, back pressing into the table he had been occupying. “What’re you – actually, where have you been?!” His eyes narrowed making the switch from defensive to accusing.

Ginny came to a stop feet from Harry, fire in her watery eyes. Her normally pale complexion was blotchy with red, making her look like a tomato. Harry held that last bit to himself, not trusting his friend’s temper.

“When you just disappear and no one can find you-! What am I supposed to think, huh? I thought you’d been attacked!” Ginny was almost in tears as she glared at her perfectly healthy friend.

She wants to talk about disappearing? Really?!

“And how’s that different from you? Where were you? I needed you and you weren’t there!” he pushed off the table, almost stalking towards her, “I needed you. I had to ask your brothers…” And how embarrassing was that; having to ask his friend’s brothers how she was?

Harry wasn’t much intimidating with his stature being similar to a First Year and his voice still holding its high pitch of childhood. But what everyone knew, and made many wary of him, was his temper. She had been fortunate enough that it had never been directed at her before, until now.

She staggered back, eyes darting back and forth as her brows pushed together in distress.

“I needed my friend.”

“I was-I was trying to process everything. And I thought, I thought you might blame me.” She whispered quietly, the fire in her eyes before now gone.

Why would he blame her? He asked her as much, calming down a little.

“If I hadn’t been in detention I would’ve been with Hermione and she wouldn’t’ve been attacked.”
She bit her lip, guilt across her face at her admission.

Harry stood frozen. That was why Ginny had avoided him, she thought he’d blame her? He closed his eyes, wanting to disappear.

A soft touch on his hand broke him out of his thoughts.

“I was so scared and I didn’t want to lose you.”

Harry let her take his hand. There, in the empty corridor, they could pretend like it was only the two of them in the world, that there wasn’t someone out there hunting Muggleborns, that paranoia and fear weren’t dictating the actions of the castle’s populace, that they weren’t missing a member of their trio. No, in that moment he just wanted it to be Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter.

They stood there in silence for a minute, thoughts churning in their heads, one wondering if they were even still friends. Harry broke the oppressive silence, staring at a spot beyond her shoulder.

“Back at the orphanage, and even the Dursleys, I never had friends. I never had someone I would care about losing.” He took a breath before looking at her, “And I thought it’d be better that way. I’d been alone for so long I didn’t think I’d need someone.”

Harry rarely talked freely about his life outside of Hogwarts so Ginny let him talk, knowing this might be what he needed.

“But then I met you and Derrick and Hermione and everyone else and I don’t think I want to be alone again. For the first time I don’t feel like ‘boy’ or ‘freak’ or the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’.”

Ginny gripped his hand tighter, shifting her gaze to the side, unable to keep the connection.

“You’re my best friend, Harry. And if anything happened to you-.” It was Harry’s turn to look away, pulling his hand out of her cold, ink stained ones. He shifted uncomfortably, hand moving to the back of his chair for something to grip.

This shouldn’t be something they’re worrying about. They were eleven and twelve and yet they had already been through so much. It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t right but that didn’t stop it from happening, from being their life. Both held onto their dark secrets, scared of rejection, scared of being alone. Scared the other might look at them, with all their faults, and care for them anyway.

She didn’t voice it but she could tell that Harry wasn’t comfortable with people caring about him. She had seen it after his first Quidditch match and in the days after the attack on Justin and Sir Nicholas. He pulled away, dodging the obvious concern, waving off inquiries.

They couldn’t have lived more opposite lives.

Harry who was orphaned from a young age vs Ginny who had two very loving parents and six older brothers

Harry who was abandoned by his remaining family in an orphanage vs Ginny who grew up in a warm, love filled household

Harry knowing nothing of his world vs Ginny knowing his story since she was a little girl

Harry who had probably never had anyone say they love him since his parents died vs Ginny whose mother just sent her a letter last week with those three words
Despite those differences, despite everything, they couldn’t have been more similar in that very
moment. And she knew when to push and when to pull back; this was not a time to push.

She took a step back, “Professor McGonagall is furious that you missed class. She was almost
fuming at the ears last period.”

His actions had consequences and his only thought was that at least it wasn’t Snape…but the Head
of Gryffindor could be very scary. Harry gulped, looking to his wrist for the time. It was almost
lunch. He had missed his first two periods.

“It’s best not to keep her waiting. I’d get it over with now before she can get any more mad.” She
had learned that from the twins. They said it was best to get the punishment over with as soon as
possible with Professor McGonagall as the longer she was kept waiting the worse her eventual
punishment.

Ginny turned to get back to lunch but not before turning around one last time, “Pick me up tonight?
I hear you might even be able to see Pluto.”

Harry gave her a smile, nodding that, yes, he would pick her up to go to the Astronomy Tower
tonight.

With a wide smile, Ginny ran off to catch the last bit of lunch.

Harry sighed when she was finally out of sight, turning around to move his parchment off the
diary. He let the thought linger for a moment before he finally placed it in his bag with the rest of
his belongings and headed to McGonagall’s office. He’d have to go to Professor Flitwick’s later but
he was more lenient than the strict Scottish Professor.

/  

Huddled in his comfortable bed later that night, Harry had Tom Riddle’s diary open, pencil
hovering over the parchment, trying to decide if he should continue writing. His desire for answers
outweighed his apprehension.

“Tom?”

“Harry?”

Harry let out a sigh of relief at the response. His pencil coming down eagerly with his inquiry.

“You said you knew who opened the chamber. Who was it?”

The reply came almost as swiftly.

“It will be easier if I show you.”

Show him? Harry moved to set the diary down, a feeling of wrongness creeping up his spine. The
diary pages began to turn and the crease began to crack open, light bursting forth. His hand came to
shield his eyes as he felt himself being drawn in.

The world felt strange, almost like it was lacking something, something that couldn’t be put into
words. It felt cold, empty.

Bringing his hand down, Harry took in his surroundings. He was in the castle, the architecture
easily recognizable. Voices sounded above him, hushed voices laced with worry, fear, and…
He felt his heart clench as a stretcher was carried down the staircase, a small arm hanging off the edge from under the sheet covering the rest of her body. Her, because who else could the dead student be but Myrtle. Tom had brought him to the night of her murder.

“Riddle!”

Harry looked up, not quite believing who he was seeing. He knew Professor Dumbledore was old but the man before he was looking well into his sixties and this was fifty years ago. Curious though, he never pictured him having auburn hair. “Come.” He motioned with his hands. It was hard to tell if the student in question was in trouble as the professor gave nothing away.

“Professor Dumbledore.” Harry gravitated towards Tom Riddle. There was something about the boy that drew him in and it wasn’t his handsome features. He could easily draw the connection between the person he had been speaking to in the dairy and this young man.

“It is not wise to be wandering around this late hour, Tom.” The fifty years younger Dumbledore locked Tom with the same penetrating stare Harry knew all too well from his interactions with the man.

“Yes, Professor,” Tom stopped in front of Dumbledore. “I-I suppose I…I had to see for myself if the rumours were true.” The boy shuffled, arms locked behind his back, as if coming to a firm decision.

“I’m afraid they are Tom.” Harry’s eyes widened at the sharp tone Dumbledore’s tone took. It was hard, almost angry. It was something he never pictured hearing from his headmaster directed at a student. The closest had been when the man in question was reprimanding Snape Halloween night.

“About the school as well? I don’t have a home to go to; they wouldn’t really close Hogwarts, would they Professor?” Harry heard the same pleading he himself had used only months ago to the same professor. The same fear, the same desperation. Tom and he were alike.

“I understand Tom, but I’m afraid Headmaster Dippet may have no choice.”

“Sir – if it all stopped – if the person responsible was caught –”

Dumbledore shifted, gazing at the Prefect with his penetrating stare. “Is there…something you wish to tell me?”

“No, sir,” said Tom in the same way Harry himself had denied knowing the cause of the strange incidences at the orphanage.

It was like watching a war between the two with Dumbledore looking for more answers and Tom unwilling to relinquish.

The professor seemed to give up, visibly deflating as he sighed, “Very well then, off to bed.”

Harry could still hear the heavy footsteps on the stairs below, a reminder of the terrible act that had unfolded this night, and the legacy that would remain in a girl’s lavatory decades later. He wondered if Tom had known Myrtle. He tried to imagine what it would be like if someone in the school died – what if it was someone he knew?

Harry brushed pass Dumbledore, the phantom feel of his robes against his bare arms making him shiver. It was almost like real life; he could touch and feel in the memory but he had no influence.
on the events happening.

Harry took off in a run after Tom, the boy on a mission as he didn’t hesitate in his direction. They were in part of the castle Harry vaguely recognized from his nightly wandering last year. It was an abandoned part of the dungeon that no one frequented. It was also the perfect place to hide a deadly beast it seems.

Tom drew his wand, a spell Harry didn’t recognize slipping pass his lips.

The door blew open, revealing a giant figure crouched over a container. Harry moved closer, eagerness filling him at finally being able to see the thing that had been attacking the students. Tom was blocking the doorway so he was stuck with a sliver of the heir.

Wait…did he say Rubeus? The same Rubeus Hagrid who was currently Gamekeeper?

“-monsters don’t make good pets. They’ll have your wand for this.”

Harry struggled with this revelation. While it made sense – the whole school was aware Hagrid had tried to raise a baby dragon in his hut last year – the part of Hagrid being the Heir didn’t. The man had to be half giant and clearly wasn’t in Slytherin. He didn’t fit the description. He also didn’t have any children at Hogwarts. Why wait fifty years to open the chamber again?

Harry observed the regret etched into Tom’s face as he held Hagrid at wand point as the creature escaped into the night. He truly believed he had caught the culprit. The image began to blur, twisting into a room Harry was familiar place – the library.

“Hagrid was expelled and the attacks stopped.” Harry turned to the one addressing him. Tom’s pleasant, soft-spoken voice washed over him as he came into view from behind a bookcase.

Harry stepped back as the teenager approached. He felt tiny, unworthy, in this boy’s presence. A disarming, charming smile put him at ease. He must still be on edge from events of the last week.

Harry considered those words, mulling over his previous thoughts, pulling in everything he had read about the Chamber and Slytherin’s line.

He hesitated to speak, not wanting to upset the memory.

“I just – I can’t believe it was him. I mean, he works at the school and the Chamber was only opened this year.” Harry paced, thinking, pulling his thoughts into order as he drew his conclusions, oblivious to the hungry eyes watching his every movement. “He isn’t intelligent enough to manipulate the entire staff if he was responsible. And he loves muggleborns.”

Tom raised a single eyebrow, appearing to consider Harry’s words.

“You believe it was a set up; the real culprit framed Hagrid and his beast?”

Harry paused, looking at the fifty year old memory, throwing away his reservations. “I think the beast is a serpent. I’m a parseltongue and I can hear it in the walls before it attacks.”

Tom’s eyes widened, breathe catching. “Fascinating!” he breathed out, stepping closer. “And you said you are a Potter? There’s no record of the Slytherin and Potter lines crossing.”

Harry waited for the eventual fear and accusation to cross those dark eyes but it never came. Fascination and wonder lite them up instead and Harry felt himself smile despite best efforts.
“I’ve spent weeks researching it and I haven’t discovered a possible link.”

Tom appeared to get a hold of his excitement as he pulled back, a considering look on his face. Harry felt like an intruder as he watched the teenager think.

“So it’s a serpent that has been prowling the school.” His gaze turned to Harry, a considering look. “There are no serpents that can petrify but there are many that have the ability to kill.”

The coldness had disappeared, replaced by a feeling of warmth as he drew closer to Tom. Harry subconsciously moved closer in an attempt to stay near the feeling.

Harry thought back to all the times he had heard the voice in the walls, heard it stalking its next victim, hunting, and realized something.

“It’s been trying to kill, not petrify.” His voice grew in his anxiousness, the sudden realization that the only reason no one had died yet being pure accident. “Every time I hear it, it’s talking about killing yet no one’s died.”

“So the petrification is purely accidental, a secondary byproduct of the serpents inability to kill.”

Tom summarized Harry’s thoughts, letting the boy continue his thought process. The boy wasn’t what he was expecting and he wanted to see just how capable he was. He was already farther than any other person outside the Gaunt’s had been.

“Think. Was anything different – out of place – at the time of the attack? Was there anything they had in common?”

Harry thought hard, trying to recall each attack.

Halloween night it had been Mrs. Norris and the writing on the wall. The floor had been flooded, a result from Moaning Myrtle he concluded in hindsight.

The next attack had been the Creevey boy but he hadn’t seen where he was found.

Justin was next with Sir Nicholas.

The last was Hermione and Penelope Clearwater. The only thing off was the hand mirror. Hermione didn’t own a hand mirror so why did she have it?

Harry grunted in frustration. It was like he was missing something! There was something connecting them!!

…Wait! Creevey had a camera, it never left his vicinity. It was even near his hospital bed!

There! That was it.

Harry looked up, eyes unfocused as he pulled the pieces together.

“Everyone saw it through a reflection, through an image of something else. That must be why they were petrified!” his eyes focused again, setting them on Tom who motioned for him to continue, “The caretaker’s cat saw it reflected in the water that flooded the floor; Creevey must’ve saw it through his camera lens; Justin saw it through Sir Nicholas; and Hermione must’ve figured it out because she had the mirror!”

A smile broke across Tom’s face, showing his brilliantly white teeth. Harry felt himself flush at the impressed look he was receiving.
“There’s only one beast I can think of that can kill when a person gazes upon it; do you know what I speak of?”

Harry swallowed, his saliva feeling like a stone as it passed down his throat. Yes, he knew exactly what it was. He had come across it in his research into Slytherin and parseltongue. But it wasn’t a beast he wanted to think about. Of all the accounts he had read, a basilisk was one of the most dangerous creatures in existence. The only thing capable of killing it being the crowing of a rooster.

“A basilisk.”

A book appeared on the table in front of them, opening without prompting to the desired page.

“My ability is not limited to showing you my memories. I control this space, my mind having memorized every aspect of the castle before my original self created me. This,” he gestured to the surrounding selves, “is a perfect replica of the library fifty years ago.”

That was powerful magic, magic Harry could only hope he could one day learn. He wondered why he had never heard of Tom Riddle before. He showed up in no books on the greatest witches and wizards of the past century. Surely if he was this powerful at sixteen, he went on to do great things.

A terrible, horrible thought crossed his mind. A thought that had plagued his mind when he thought of his parents.

Maybe he didn’t have the time, not if he was killed by Voldemort.

Harry swallowed that dark thought, not voicing it to the young man in front of him.

"Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size, and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it."

Tom read the passage from the book, his smooth voice drawing in Harry, snatching his attention.

“A refection deflects instant death and induces a death-like state of petrification. None would know this as I imagine none thought a reflection could mitigate the effects.” Tom’s eyes continued to flicker across the page, no doubt lining up the attacks of his time with what the book was detailing of the beast.

The world began to spin, colors spinning together, this world feeling as though it was rejecting him. He had enough time to see dark eyes snap in his direction before he felt himself ejected from the memory world, roughly deposited on his bed.

Breathing hard, he scrambled to the diary laying at the other end of the bed, closed. Desperate hands fumbled with his pencil as he became desperate to talk with Tom. They had just gotten somewhere!

Chest heaving, he held his breath, waiting for an answer.

A second passed, and then five more, until a full minute passed with no response.
Throwing the book in rage, Harry scrambled out of bed, thrusting his feet into his sneakers. Making sure not to wake his dorm mates, he opened the door to enter the common room. He needed to calm down. He had been letting his anger get the better of him the past few days. He knew it wasn’t healthy and it wasn’t fair to his friends for him to lash out at them.

But he had been so close!

Talking with Tom had felt so natural, like he had known him all his life. Being with Tom was like his brain was on overdrive, his thoughts just zooming by. It was safe to say he had never met anyone like him before.

Sitting at the common room window, the cold calming his thoughts, Harry knew the conversation hadn’t been for nothing. He had an idea on what the beast was and what was better, he knew how to kill it. When the sun came up in the morning he would make his way to the orchard to get a rooster. If he let one loose in the castle there was a chance it could take out the basilisk. The only problem with this plan was that he still didn’t know who the Heir was. It was clear Hagrid had been set up so that means the real culprit had gotten away with their crime. And if he couldn’t think of a new plan, they would get away with it again.

Head pressed against the glass, Harry vowed he wouldn’t let that happen. They would pay for going after Hermione.

It was cowardly, he knew that, but he did it anyway. Handing his parchment to Terry to give to Snape, Harry went to the Hospital Wing, feeling ‘sick’. With any luck Madam Pomfrey could get him out of Lockhart’s class as well.

Madam Pomfrey took one look at him and gave him a Pepper Up potion and ordered him to get some rest on the nearby bed.

“You’re too pale, Mr. Potter. You should’ve come to me sooner.” She admonished him, tutting as she shuffled around her domain. Harry didn’t argue, knowing the stress from the last week had done a toll on his body. A quick rest wouldn’t hurt, he thought as he closed his eyes, oblivious to the fact Madam Pomfrey had given him a light dose of sleeping draught.

Seeing him doze off, the matron looked at him in concern, moving to take his glasses from his face. Moving the blanket to cover his shoulders, she gave him one last look before moving to check on her petrified patients. She would send a note to his Head of House, explaining his absence from his morning classes.

Harry woke up, feeling well rested for the first time in days. Vision blurry, his hand reached out for his glasses, confused at when he had removed them. Last he remembered was closing his eyes for a brief rest.

“Ah! Mr. Potter, just in time for lunch.” Madam Pomfrey’s voice called from where she was corking a potion vial. “I sent word to Professor Flitwick on your absence and he has notified your morning professors of your absence.”

It was lunch? But his plans…Harry shook his head. She was sly, he’d give her that. She must’ve slipped him more than a simple Pepper Up.

“Now, let me take a look at you.”
She flicked her wand, humming at whatever it was she was checking. A cold hand took a hold of his wrist, fingers on his pulse as she counted.

“You’re temperature is slightly elevated and I don’t like how pale you are but I don’t see why you can’t attend your afternoon classes. Just be sure not to overdo it. I want you back here before supper for another Pepper Up.”

“Barny old witch.” Harry mumbled as he exited the Hospital Wing, not giving her the satisfaction that her actions were appreciated. He felt better, more energized. Walking into the Great Hall for a bite to eat, he made his way to Gryffindor table when red hair caught his attention. Sliding into the seat beside her, he grabbed at the surrounding food, famished.

Multiple pairs of eyes stared at him and a few bodies scooted further away. He ignored it all in favor of reaching for the roast chicken.

Ginny amused herself, staring at him in exasperation.

“I heard you spent the morning with Madam Pomfrey.” She took a sip of her pumpkin juice, moving another glass into Harry’s reach.

Harry took a moment to swallow before answering, “That witch is mental. Spiked me with a bit of sleeping draught.”

Ginny couldn’t control the snort that escaped her as she tried to take another drink.

“I’ll have to remember that one.” Her eyes darted to the dark circles under his eyes.

Harry rolled his eyes but didn’t argue. He wondered if Ginny had been taking Pepper Up potions. She looked livelier than she had in days, eyes brighter.

“You can’t keep skipping class though. You missed yesterday’s classes as well. You’ll be lucky if you don’t spend the rest of the year in detention.”

Pushing his plate away from him, Harry turned to his friend. Usually it was Hermione doing the nagging, trying to keep the two of them out of trouble.

“I actually want to-.” He broke off, tongue suddenly too big for speech.

Twins bodies found themselves situated snuggly against his side, freckled face appearing inches before his own, one pulling open his mouth.

“Now, do you feel any pain-?”

“Nausea-?”

“Any strange urges-?”

“Oh, what about vision? Any strange colors?”

Harry looked at the twins, eye twitching in annoyance. This wasn’t the first time he had been subjected to one of their little experiments. His accusing eyes turned to Ginny who did nothing but shrug. Hey, it was his mistake for trusting the glass she had given him.

“Now this is important,” the twin on his left started, getting even closer, “Is there swelling anywhere else?”
Laughter rang out around the table as Harry tried to yell at them but all that came out was babbling. Hands clapped his back, “You’ve been a good sport-.”

“Yeah, and the effects should only last a few more minutes-.”

“Didn’t want to risk a longer dose.”

His sides were once again empty, the twins moving to torment another poor soul. But as they said, he could already feel his tongue shrinking.

Ginny tried unsuccessfully to stifle her laughter, failing when she caught sight of his puffy mouth. Taking a deep breath, she bit her lip to hold back any more laughter knowing her friend didn’t see the humour in the situation.

“Hey, it was you or me! If Fred and George ask you something, you do it.”

Harry conceded to her point. You didn’t want those two to have you on their radar. Best to do them a favor and be on their good side. That didn’t mean he liked being thrown under the bus like that.

When his tongue was finally back to the right size, he moved it around and stuck it out, making sure it was still functioning.

“Do they hate me or something?” It’s what it felt like sometimes. But the twins were complicated people.

Ginny shook her head negatively. “You’d know if they hated you. A swollen tongue would be the least of your worries.” Ginny remember the story of how the twins trapped Miles Bletchley in the Owllery last year and caused a mass panic in the owls. There were rumors that he still flinched every time an owl came near him. She had witnessed it herself during post one day. No, the twins did not hate Harry. “It’s more of an initiation thing. Ron’s been through much worse and Percy’s given them more detentions for the pranks they play against him than Flich.”

“So they like me?”

Ginny cringed slightly, mouth pulling to the side, “Wweellll… I wouldn’t say like.” She appeared to think about it for a second, “But you are one of their favorite test subjects.”

“Ginny Weasley, why did I ever befriend you?” Harry asked in faux hurt.

This was why they were good for each other. Harry couldn’t even remember what it was he had been so worried about. She made him laugh and smile and he felt so relaxed around her. He even liked her brothers, despite their tendency to experiment on him.

Gaining a serious expression, he leaned in closer so no one could listen in.

“I have a plan and I need your help. It involves roosters.”

Ginny’s breath hitched, catching in her chest.

“Roo-roosters?” she stuttered, gazed turning to Harry.

“I have a theory and I want to test it out tonight.” Harry either didn’t notice or chose to ignore her reaction as he continued on. “Meet me at curfew, same place?”

Ginny hesitated, biting her lip as she struggled to come up with an answer.
“I-.”

Harry was pulled away before she could finish, Derrick dragging him by his collar out of the hall, ranting about detentions and missing practices. He gave her a helpless shrug before he was out of sight.
Harry stood outside the Gryffindor portrait for an hour but Ginny never showed. He was disappointed when the Fat Lady informed him that the common room was empty, knowing that there was no way Ginny had forgotten so that meant that she had ditched him. With a sigh and a glance at his watch – it was a quarter past – he resigned himself to testing out his theory by himself. Pulling his Invisibility Cloak over his head, Harry headed outside to the Gamekeeper's property where the roosters coo was located.

The walk was cold and lonely, a walk that would've been greatly improved with a companion to share body heat huddled together. His body shivered in the cold night air at the thought, his breath conveniently hidden by his cloak.

Despite the loss of companion, there was a pep in his step, a hope he couldn't push down. It led to him feeling especially giddy as his feet crunched the frozen grass. His earlier rest and his revelation from the night before had put him in an unparalleled mood. Even the tongue thrashing Derrick had given him earlier had done nothing to diminish this happiness, this anticipation that he could finally solve all their problems tonight. End this endless paranoia and fear that plagued the school. That by dawn, this could all be nothing but a distant memory.

His worn sneakers continued to crunch on the frozen grounds, spring still a few weeks from setting in. The night was cloudy and it was only thanks to his many nightly travels out this way that he didn't lose his way. Being found out of bed this last at night, lurking around the grounds, would cause more than mere suspicion; he would be lucky not to be hauled away for questioning.

"'Hey Harry! I'll let my brothers prank you but I won't go out with you after curfew.'" Harry found himself muttering under his breath as he trekked across the grounds. "'S'not like you're about to solve a millennia old mystery!'"

Urgh, he was talking to himself again! If Hermione were here, she'd give him a lecture no doubt, on the benefits of talking to one's self and also the psychological implications.

But she wasn't here which was why he was doing this. Someone had to do something and if the professors weren't, than he would. Too many people had been allowed to suffer; how many more students had to be petrified before someone did something? What if next time the student wasn't so lucky; what if they looked directly into the basilisk's eyes?
He never wanted to find out the answer to the thought that entered his mind when he saw Myrtle's lifeless body being carried away.

The rooster coo came into view and his footsteps quickened, his eagerness getting the better of his caution. He did remember to stay as silent as possible though. The last thing he needed was for the bloody birds to give him away. There was no way he would be able to get out of detention, or worse, if he was caught. Especially McGonagall, she would have his head.

Casting a weak lumos, Harry peeked inside the small coo and felt his stomach drop: it was empty!

How, how was that even possible?

Stepping away, Harry was sure his heart was about to beat right out of his chest, like he was moments away from hyperventilating as his lungs struggled to keep up with his frantic breaths. This had been his only option to prove his innocence, to stop the attacks. His bran whirled as he tried to think, tried not to crumble under yet another defeat.

…This wasn't the end. He could go to the Headmaster, tell him his discoveries, force him to act!

He knew about the voice and the question he had asked – the man had to have some suspicion. Dumbledore was one of the most powerful wizards alive, if Harry could deduce this mystery then surely the Headmaster could see the facts?

The silence of the night took over as the chill seeped into his bones, his teeth beginning to chatter.

_Honestly, Harry. Are you trying to catch a cold?_

Hermione's voice sounded in his head, pulling a smile across his frozen face. It was just like her to nag. She might complain about his nightly wanderings but he knew if he asked, she would be out here with him, lecturing him about the rules all the while.

There wasn't much left for him out here, he confessed, turning around to trek back to the castle.

Howling broke the silence of the night, startling a jump out of Harry who turned around looking for the source. His eyes widened in fear when he located the source and saw the hut light up, a hulking figure moving to the door.

Crap crap crap!

He threw his cloak back on, hoping the man hadn't seen him.

"Who's there?" the gruff voice of the gameskeeper demanded, appearing with a crossbow at his door, his trusted hound at his heels.

Harry froze, holding his breath, trying very hard not to make any noise. This was a man known to venture out into the Forbidden Forest alone. If anyone could find him under an Invisibility Cloak, it would be this giant of a man.

The man was skittish – paranoid – Harry realized, as Hagrid shifted around on his doorstep, looking across the grounds in distrust.

So it was true; the man had been expelled for opening the Chamber. And he was expecting someone – or something. Why else would he come to the door armed?

Harry made his way back to the castle when Hagrid and his hound retreated back inside. What if he
talked with Hagrid, asked about what creature he had that escaped all those years ago? Maybe that could clear his name so the search for the real assailant could finally move forward.

The corridors were silent, as they should be this late at night, and Harry didn't know if it was a good or bad sign.

/

He sat up in the common room for the rest of the morning, too wound up to get any sort of rest. He stared listlessly at the statue of Rowena Ravenclaw, wondering why he was put into this house. Out of everything that had happened to him, it was clear that he wasn't a Ravenclaw. What had the Sorting hat seen that had pushed him to Ravenclaw?

“You must confront your past if you are to ever rise above it.”

A vase shattered above the fireplace, breaking the dead silence. Screw that! He didn't need to confront his past. He had lived it, felt every second of it and replayed that night over and over until he could see it with his eyes open! He felt every bloody emotion and he hated that, hated that he had allowed those people to continue to hurt him.

He wasn't brave and he knew he wasn't loyal. Did the Sorting Hat make a mistake; was he supposed to be in Slytherin?

Derrick's smile flashed across his dark eyelids followed by Nate, Ryan, Emily, Terry, Padma, and his best friends, Ginny and Hermione.

And it was with those two that he realized what he had missed before.

He was brave and loyal and ambitious but most of all, he knew how to use those qualities. He sought knowledge not for knowledge sake but to use it, to create something more for himself because someone had to do something.

Someone had to make sure a little eight year old child was never left outside in the middle of the night while his uncle drove away. That people were held accountable for their actions, that the complaints of a kids were listened to and not disregarded. That students couldn't bully others just because they were different, because they had an ability that set them apart.

His eyes caught the diadem at the top of the Founder's head, a tugging erupted from inside him, like he recognized the object. But he had never seen it before nor did he know what it was. It was a curious thing though, as he never pictured Ravenclaw as someone to flourish and revel in wealth and trinkets.

/

“Tom?”

Dumbledore was gone, urgent business at the Ministry taking him away from the school and Harry wanted to curse something. Instead, he turned to the only one who had given him more than an ounce of help.

“Yes?”

His elegant penmanship looped onto the page, neither rushed nor prying.

"The rooster were gone. I was too late"
"You tried your best. That is all anyone can ask of you, Harry."

No, it isn't. He needed more than his best...he needed to be the greatest. Maybe then people would take him seriously, maybe then he could actually make a difference.

His focus zoned out as his thoughts took him to a place long kept isolated in his depths of his mind. The place that had once whispered to the Sorting Hat to place him in Slytherin House so he could prove he was the best, to put him on the path to greatness so that no one could ever hurt him again. His darkest, coldest secrets kept locked away from the world. The revenge an eight year old Harry had sworn to enact one day if he were to ever see the Dursley's again. The thirst for knowledge outside the acceptability of the school curriculum. His endless nights prowling the Restricted Section, looking for what, he did not know.

The desire. The endless, hungry desire for more...to be more...

"Harry Potter?" A smooth, questioning voice broke him from his abyss, drawing startled emerald eyes.

Standing only meters away was the form of Tom Riddle, identical to the one he had seen that night in the diary. His wavy hair perfectly combed and parted to the side. His uniform, all three pieces of it, put together smartly with obvious care. Even the boy's shoes were polished to the point Harry was sure he could see his reflection in them.

Tom continued in his study of Harry who had yet to respond. His eyebrows lifted as his face took on a look of concern. His un-creased slacks moving in perfect stride with the rest of his perfect body, Harry couldn't help but notice. His gaze continued to travel upwards until his eyes rested on his companion's.

They were darker than dark, almost absent of color themselves if not for a flickering light highlighting the almost auburn spots dotting his iris.

"Are you well?" A richness enunciating each word that grabbed Harry's attention, bringing his gaze to the lips that brought that noise, to the mouth that spoke of secrets and horrors long since forgotten, to the boy who promised him greatness.

He couldn't do this on his own –

"Help me." Those words fell out of his mouth, a plea of desperation for something, for anything. A smirk curled at Tom's lips, his cheeks upturning in pleasure, in understanding, in triumph.

"Gladly."
Chapter 8

Tom Riddle was many things, a powerful wizard, a charming student, a handsome boy, the brightest wizard to ever set foot in Hogwarts. He was all that and yet in the face of a desperate twelve-year-old, he found the title he coveted above all else: Savior.

He held the power to not only control but to crush this boy who had defeated his other self. He could finish what Voldemort could not. And he would’ve, if his diary hadn’t fallen into the boy’s possession. Now he had other plans. The boy was powerful, more powerful than he realized and he would tap into that potential, guide him to his way of thinking. Harry wasn’t as powerful as he had been at that age but he could be.

He lacked the proper guidance and until now, had lacked the motivation to be better. Harnessing the power he could feel calling out to him, Tom knew nothing would stand in his way with Harry by his side. When he was finished with the boy, the world would bow before him. When people would talk of Harry Potter, it wouldn’t be how he defeated Lord Voldemort, no, they would fear him, see that no one was safe from Lord Voldemort. Harry Potter would help him bring the world to its knees.

Cold satisfaction filled his body as the boy pleaded with him, begged for his help. And how could he refuse such a request? He, who took on less worthy, those with a quarter of the power Harry promised him.

Standing above the boy, he felt the power he had long missed. And he just knew he finally had Dumbledore cornered, the fool having done half the work for him. The old man clearly hadn’t learned from past mistakes.

Harry was determined. He was angry. He was on a mission.

This whole kid’s stuff, playing with magic, was grating on his nerves. What did he need to go to classes for when he could learn everything from the library, from Tom? Why would he sit through a class where all his efforts were vanished with a flick of a wrist and a sneer? Tom was his teacher now and he had already learned so much in the short time he had the diary.

If the school didn’t want to see him, fine, he’d give them what they wanted. He knew the castle like the back of his hand by now. If he wanted, he could travel the entire castle and never run into another person. It was pretty useful for getting to and from his dorm undisturbed.

It had only been a week since he had asked Tom for help and he was already more confident in his abilities than he had been learning Defense the last two years. The teenager scolded Harry for his childish approach to the duel between himself and Draco all those months ago. He praised his spell combination but lectured that kiddy spells would not save his life in a real duel. That, if he was going to protect himself and his friends, he needed to learn real spells. He needed to grow up and grow up fast.

He ground his teeth in frustration at the dig, knowing he was more mature than most of the students at Hogwarts. But he could see where Tom was coming from and swore to do better.

“You realized you’re not going to be saved by anyone. The only person you can depend on is yourself. Now you need to act on that knowledge. Right now, you only inspire embarrassment with
the spells you’ve mastered. In a duel, you need to be prepared to take a life. If you’re not able to do so, I’m wasting my time on you.” Tom sneered as he circled his student, not holding back in his criticism.

Cheeks flushed in embarrassment, Harry stepped forward and growled, “I won’t hesitate!”

Tom saw green eyes flash and felt a smirk fall into place, there he was.

“Excellent.”

The attacks began with no warning. Harry wasn’t fast enough to dodge all of them and sported multiple cuts. Nothing too serious, mostly just superficial to show Tom was serious but that meant nothing as they discovered physical injuries didn’t carry over into the physical world. Mentally and magically, Harry was exhausted after each training session but he was fine physically with no visible wounds.

The advantage of using his diary was that he controlled every aspect inside of it. He was able to pull Harry inside to train but it also gave him time to study the boy, not just physically but magically as well. They had a connection, deeper than he originally thought, something he felt inside the boy. The boy spoke parseltongue yet wasn’t a descendant of Slytherin. He knew Harry was drawn to him as well as the boy frequently, almost unconsciously, edged closer to him in his soul dimension. While having a connection to someone was annoying, it didn’t seem to affect him the same way it did Harry. He had no desire to be within the vicinity of the boy and the extent of his interest remained to utilize the boy’s power. But it was an interesting find and definitely useful information.

Harry was improving exponentially. The Ravenclaw was not unlike a sponge, mastering every spell he was shown rather quickly for a boy his age. Tom wondered if the boy was a gift from magic itself for him. He followed his every instruction, trusted him, and didn’t question when he had him read YING YANG: WHY WE NEED BOTH DARK AND LIGHT MAGIC. He finally found someone worthy of his teachings and the boy was at the perfect age to mold into the image Tom desired.

Best to start him off small before teaching him anything too dark though. Tom knew Harry was already curious about dark magic, had read a few books concerning the topic but had yet to act on his desire to actually use the magic he was reading about. That was a byproduct of the times, it seemed. Dark magic was further frowned upon now than it had been during his schooling. Now it seemed that any interest in the Dark Arts was an immediate suspicion, something Harry was smart enough to realize wasn’t productive. He was clever enough to use caution but if he truly wanted to be on a level with Tom, he would’ve found a way to practice his magic undetected. Something he would be sure to remind the boy of. He would accept no excuses.

The attacks increased and Harry could do nothing but throw up his weak shield spell. That was his newest spell, protego, and the purpose of this duel. Tom was relentless and most of his spells broke his shield with little effort, something that kept pushing Harry to do better. He wouldn’t disappoint Tom!

///

Harry lay panting, knowing if he was in the real world, sweat would be dripping off his face. They were able to do this longer and longer with each practice. Where before, Harry could only stay in this place for a few minutes, they were up to three hours before Tom felt his strength drain away.

“When I first saw you, you told Dumbledore you didn’t have a home to go to…why?” he asked between pants.
He had wondered that but hadn’t the courage to ask until now. He and Tom had gotten closer and maybe now was the time to learn a little bit about each other personally.

Tom, for his part, didn’t look surprised by the question. He had shown Harry that part for a reason.

“Simply because I didn’t have a home. I grew up in an orphanage in London.” It was clinical like the information held no significance.

Harry whipped his head around, vision going black for a second, and stared at the boy. How could Tom be an orphan? Everything about him screamed rich pureblood.

Tom seemed to read his mind, answering the unspoken question, “I sculpted out an image for myself here at school. I would never settle being the orphan muggleborn, not when I knew I was superior to the rest of my year. I wanted to be respected, I wanted people to look up to me,” Tom said as he paced in front of Harry. “Surely, you understand.”

Harry knew it wasn’t a question. Tom knew he was an orphan and had guessed he was also raised in an orphanage. His calming heart rate began to pick up again.

“Those who treat you like trash because they have and you do not. Because their clothes are a quality finer and bellies a bit rounder.”

The familiar rage began to settle in his chest at the reminder. Of all the school days when the kids would steal what little he had, taunt him about being unwanted, or just avoid him because he was an orphan, like that somehow made them better. Of the people on the street who would clutch their bags a tiny bit tighter when they saw them on the street, the store clerk who would follow them around when they entered his store.

Oh yes, he knew exactly what Tom was talking about.

“Magic was my escape, what made me different, powerful. If I couldn’t have respect in the muggle world, I would have it in my world.”

Tom stopped in his pacing, looking for Harry’s reaction and a satisfied look lit up his dark eyes as he saw the anger and turmoil raging inside the young Potter. Muggles were nothing if not predictable.

Pulling himself up from the floor, Harry clenched his fists as his past came barreling forward, “I-I want to make them pay…to suffer the way I suffered. They knew what I could do and they left me like some animal!”

The room began to distort, signaling their time had run out.

Tom walked over, his elegance something Harry admired even more now that he knew Tom’s past. His words like echoes on a wave, rolling, crashing into him as the world around him collapsed. But he knew what they were and the promise that had been made.

“We’ll make them all pay.”

/

The study room hidden away on the fourth floor became his domain. He ate, slept, trained, and studied there.

His friends were getting worried about him. He still attended Quidditch practice but he was the last
to arrive and the first to leave. They could barely get two sentences out of the boy before he was flying high into the sky, waiting for the snitch.

Also, come to find out, his dorm mates hadn’t seen him in over a week and his bed was still untouched from the last time he slept in it. He hadn’t been to classes or meals and Derrick wasn’t the only one who thought he was looking ragged.

This disappearing act of his did nothing but fuel the rumors that he was indeed the Heir of Slytherin as students spoke freely with the noticeable absence of Harry. They were saying it was only a matter of time until the boy got hauled in for questioning.

Ginny bit her lip worriedly, glancing around suspiciously. She had seen Harry the day before and he was acting strange but maybe it was only a phase? He was going through a stressful time and with Hermione petrified, there wasn’t anyone to reason with him. She knew if the bushy-haired Gryffindor were here, Harry would be pulled by the ear with a full-blown lecture on the importance of a balanced meal and attending classes.

But Hermione wasn’t here and Ginny didn’t know if she could be that voice of reason. She knew Harry, probably better than anyone, so she knew that there was more going on with him than just the rumors. Since she had stood him up that night, he had grown distant, almost abrupt with her. She regretted her decision but she had just been so afraid he would suspect her of killing the roosters. She knew it was her, the feathers and blood telling the story, but she wasn’t sure why or when. And that frightened her.

Her head had cleared and she felt better than she had all year like she was a completely different person, but there was that lingering dread that hung over her. She had gone to collect the diary the next day but it wasn’t there anymore. She knew something wasn’t right about that diary, about Tom. She was just too scared to say anything because she didn’t want to get in trouble. Her dad had told them countless times not to mess with magic they didn’t understand. If he found out she had been writing to something all this time, he would be so disappointed in her and she had never disappointed her dad before. Her mum was a different matter but there was something about the way those soft blue eyes would just eat into your soul. She didn’t want to see that.

She was gathering the courage to tell Harry the truth, about the diary, the roosters…everything. She couldn’t stand not talking with him anymore. Not only was she lonely without Harry, she missed him desperately. There was something wrong with him and as his best friend, it was her job to help him.

…and the best part of being his best friend? It was knowing his habits.

Knowing him was like knowing her brothers, she had every piece of blackmail material they could (and some they couldn’t) think of. She knew them so well, she could tell you when the twins were planning a prank, when Ron had snuck an extra biscuit before breakfast, even the fact the Percy had a girlfriend no one knew about. Her parents still didn’t know about the dragon tattoo Charlie got last year. She’d seen a bit of it when he was home and he had sworn her to secrecy, fearing their mother’s wrath as she abhorred tattoos. She was still cashing in on that piece of information. So in her opinion, Harry was no different than what she had been dealing with all her life.

She intercepted him on his way to the kitchen after supper finished and students were stuffed away in their dormitories.

“Harry,” she called out, giving him pause. “I think we need to talk.”

He turned to her, eyes looking heavier than the day before if that was even possible. She held back
her gasp, waiting for him to respond. He shrugged which Ginny meant he was listening. She shifted her feet, willing her courage not to fail her as she moved in closer, arm outstretched to touch his.

She pulled it back at his less than violent flinch, pleading with him, “Whatever you’re doing to yourself, it’s not healthy.”

There was something different about him, he seemed almost possessed, like he was on a mission.

His angry tirade began the moment the words left her mouth, like it had just been bubbling at the surface, waiting for the right time to burst forth, “None of this matters – the mandrakes, the rules – if the person responsible isn’t caught. I’m doing anything I can to –,” he cut himself off, fearing he had said too much, taking a step back to put the illusion of distance between them.

Ginny perked up, putting her confession to the side for the moment. If this was all about catching whoever was doing this, she would gladly help. “I want to help. Hermione was my friend too.”

There it was, that smile she had been missing the past week. It even did well to reach his eyes for a moment before it fell away behind a frown and tired eyes.

House elves rushed to the two, happily taking their order for a late supper. Ginny ignored the voice telling her to confess but she couldn’t, not when she had finally got him to smile again. She’d tell him another day. For now, she’d pretend it was like nothing was wrong, that there wasn’t a mountain separating them.

/  

“Hey!”

The group of second years turned to the voice calling for their attention. The common room was pretty full, everyone preparing for exams, so it was difficult to know who the interjection was directed to. Once they saw the Quidditch Captain making his way over, the group could conclude what the topic of conversation was going to be about.

They gave him their undivided attention though, having great respect for the Captain and Prefect.

Derrick’s blue eyes swept over their small group, searching for a face he already knew wasn’t there. Heaving out a sigh, he felt the tension increase in his shoulders.

“Have you seen Harry recently? He missed the last Quidditch practice and I haven’t seen him in the Great Hall.”

Padma and Terry shared a look. They were the two who partnered with Harry in class and hence, knew him the best of the group. For him to miss Quidditch, something he loved, they knew something was very wrong.

Terry answered for them, his tone trying to lack any accusation.

“He hasn’t been up to the dorm for the last week and a half and he’s missed the last fortnight of classes. Honestly? We’d thought he’d been petrified somewhere but the professors haven’t really done anything.”

Terry looked at his friends to see if they had anything to add but they shrugged or looked away. There was a divide between them, with a few thinking that Harry’s disappearance proved that he was hiding something, that there was a connection to the attacks.
Derrick bit his lip, eyes crinkled, so lost in thought that he didn’t notice the tense exchange between the second years.

Giving them a haphazard thanks, he made his way distractedly to the exit, knocking into Nate with barely an apology.

The group watched him leave but returned to work the second he was out of sight, conversation out of mind; finals were coming up and they needed to finish their homework and work on revising. They were already feeling the heat and wanted to get on top of everything before it was too late.

*He’d let it go on for too long.* Those were the thoughts running through Derrick’s head as he made his way to his Head’s office. *He should’ve gone there sooner. The moment he noticed something wrong.*

But he hadn’t. With Granger’s attack, he thought Harry just needed space, time to deal with the grief and shock. He never expected the boy to completely withdraw. His suspicion began when Harry started showing up later and later to practice but was always the first to leave. Normally, Harry was the first one there so he could talk to him about strategy and tactics while taking his time coming in so he could have a few more minutes in the air flying.

He didn’t say anything and he didn’t say anything when the boy stopped showing up for meals, figuring with all his wandering, he had found the kitchen.

But missing practice…Derrick knew something wasn’t right. And to learn he also hadn’t been attending classes and his dorm hadn’t been used in over a week…

Taking a deep breath, he wondered when he had become so invested in the troublesome Harry Potter. It started out as him wanting his skills as a seeker and somehow the boy had grown on him and his friends. He was a weird little outcast who they all saw as their little brother.

…one of them should’ve noticed sooner but with their NEWTs coming up, they have been so busy, focused on revising and completing the bucket loads of work their professors dumped on them every week.

He rapped thrice on the familiar wood, thoughts turning blank as it swung open, welcoming him into Professor Flitwick’s office.

“Ah, Mr. Hopkins…did you have a question on the essay I set today?”

*Essay?* It took him a moment to get his brain working again. *Right, they had a two-foot essay about the benefits and legality of the Protean Charm and the objects it can be cast on.*

“Actually, Professor, I’m here to talk about Harry.”

Dumbledore was at a loss. In front of him sat no less than eleven remarks from his professors, all relating to a single student. Six of the forms were from the resident Potions Master while the other five were from separate professors.

He rubbed at his bread, strength seemingly absent as he thought of his wayward student his professors had informed him about.
Harry Potter hadn’t been attending classes for the past fortnight and a concerned Flitwick had just informed him that the boy hadn’t been to his dorm either…which begged the question, where was he staying?

Pushing the forms aside, Dumbledore gazed at the cabinet that contained his Pensieve, remembering his thoughts when he first discovered Harry Potter was no longer at his Aunt’s home.

*It was a baffled Minerva who walked into his office that July day, her stern eyes brought together in a glare that had cowered thousands of students.*

*She demanded to know why Harry Potter was living in an orphanage in London.*

*It was one of the few times in his life he had been rendered speechless; no words of consoling, of oversight, no hopeful encouragement that the small child he had left on his aunt’s doorstep ten years ago had a happy childhood.*

*No, the only thought running through his mind was about the last orphan in London he had informed was a wizard.*

*In the fierceness she displayed to her lions, she gave no room for arguments as she demanded to be the one to introduce him to the Wizarding World. He had no room to refuse her and allowed her to leave at once.*

*When the door slammed shut, a telltale sign that he was not forgiven, Albus let his head fall into his hands, his centuries-old mind whirling in the possibilities and how he could’ve misjudged Petunia so greatly. He wasn’t left to the silence he desperately wanted, the portraits of past Headmasters and Headmistresses breaking out into gossip about the boy, with Phineas making his disgust known that a magical child was left to a muggle orphanage.*

*In the deepest parts of him, parts he had vigorously kept buried, a young Albus agreed full heartily with the deceased Headmaster. Harry Potter should’ve been raised with his family, his instructions clear and precise on the reasons why Petunia needed to take her nephew in.*

*A flutter of wings and a soft tilling of music washed over him, calming his raging thoughts enough for him to focus. Clear blue eyes looked up, taking in his familiar with a sense of gratefulness he knew was conveyed.*

“Our thank you, Fawkes.”

*A soft till was his response as his feet maneuvered across his desk, feathered head gently rubbing against his larger one. Albus took the comfort offered before raising from his seat and with a flick of his wand, manipulated the gizmos around his office, lifting the apparation wards so he could leave.*

*He needed to speak with Petunia Dursley.*

/ 

*The quintessential conformity of Privet Drive gave Albus the willies. With his lilac colored robes and waist length white beard, he knew he didn’t belong in this neighborhood. It was something one could just feel and it made him wonder if Harry had felt it too.*

*A door slamming in his face was expected. He had resigned himself to the fact that force might be necessary. Not to say he hadn’t tried to reason with the lady first.*
But he was finally able to see what Minerva had tried telling him all those years ago; the Dursleys really were the worst of the worst. But he didn’t blame them. They hadn’t asked to be pulled into the chaos of the magical world, a world they did not belong to. No, he blamed himself and Petunia’s words would forever haunt him. How could he ever look that boy in the eyes and apologize for how he had wronged him? How he had been mistaken to put him with that family.

“I never wanted the freak! I knew about that war Lily was fighting and you brought it to my doorstep with him. I have my son to worry about so I did what had to be done.” She sniffed, chin held high, daring the man before her to judge her for the lengths he had forced her to take.

And now, here he was, young Harry missing, pulling away from everyone. He knew the boy didn’t particularly like him, having to reject his request to remain at the castle over the summer. He had his suspicions on who the heir was but had yet to figure out the how. The last he had heard, Voldemort was tucked away in Albania. But there were many things concerning Tom Riddle that continued to elude him. One thing was for sure: if Riddle was involved, Harry was not safe disappearing.

He didn’t have time, oh did he not have time. The Ministry was already making inquiries and he knew Lucius was plotting. He had to get to Harry before he lost the castle.
Chapter 9

Harry was sure he was losing his mind. He had this compulsion to keep writing to Tom, almost like he had fallen into a strong gravity and couldn’t rip out of it. Subconsciously, he knew that this wasn’t right, working to exhaustion like this, but consciously, he couldn’t stop himself. Tom was all he had left now. There was no one he could trust anymore.

Nothing brought him happiness anymore except his time with Tom. His praise for his quick understanding and mastery of new subjects brought him a rare happiness, urging him to keep working and improving. Tom was a harsh teacher but he was also understanding and patient. He’d walk through the theory again if he didn’t get it the first time and he pushed him beyond what he thought were his limits.

And it was working. He could feel his magic brimming just beneath his skin, ready to bend to his will. It was wild but controlled, something Tom had explained would calm as he aged and his magic stopped growing.

But there was something else, an itch that he couldn’t reach and only went away when he was dueling Tom. He chalked it up to adrenaline but Tom knew exactly what it was when he asked, not that he would divulge what it meant just yet.

Every day he felt his powers grow stronger and stronger, his magic leeching more and more from Harry who seemed to be an endless supply of energy. He watched the boy with hunger in his eyes, taking in what he knew to be his in ways that had never been fathomable. That itch he felt was just the beginning and the more he scratched at it, the stronger it would get until there was no going back. He would have Harry Potter before the year’s end.

A predatory smirk revealed whiter than white teeth with a hint of sharp incisors. A picture of a wolf cornering his unassuming prey. As they said, patience is a virtue not that he’d ever had any.

It was only too easy to isolate Harry, the school having done a majority of the job already. The only variable was little Ginny Weasley, who was too kind, too persistent, had too much knowledge. He only had to scrape away at the small rift that had been created with her abandonment of that night. Instructing Harry on what wards to put up to keep out unwanted visitors, bleeding a portion of his magic into the spell to strengthen it and a little something extra Harry didn’t need to know about. He knew the inside of these children’s heads better than anyone, he knew their deepest fears, their darkest secrets, and innermost desires.

Poor Ginny Weasley, who only wanted a friend.

And poor Harry Potter, who only wanted acceptance.

They were a good pair and under different circumstances, they would’ve been a formidable duo…

…But he had claimed Harry Potter and Ginny had reached her limits of usefulness.

/ 

Harry couldn’t remember the last time he slept all night or even slept for that matter.

Nothing seemed to matter to him anymore except training and learning as much from Tom as he could. The young man was his saving grace, his confidant who listened to him and gave him the tools he needed to make a difference, to protect himself and those he cared for.
Harry was like the shadow people from Aristotle's allegory. He thought he had been learning magic and had been content. But Tom was the sun and every possibility of an outside world was promised in that confident charm of his. How could he refuse such an offer?

He was alone now. There was just something wrong between him and Ginny nowadays. He didn’t know how or why but he just couldn’t talk to her anymore. Every time he thought of her, a simmering rage lit up his gut and he was left agitated. Tom told him all friendship went through rough patches and that they most likely needed space.

Never having long-term friends before, or friends for that matter, Harry took Tom’s advice. It was like the world was collapsing on him, time and space, everything coming at him like there was never enough. There weren’t enough hours in the day, nowhere he could be free. So he hardened himself, swore he wouldn’t stop till it was over, till he made the person pay for hurting Hermione and framing him.

His body dragged from where it had fallen off the chair he had been sitting in before his training with Tom. Their time together was getting longer and longer and there were moments he swore the boy was as solid as a living person.

Eyes drooping as his head swayed, there was little doubt he needed sleep.

The surrounding area was piled high with books on both ancient and modern magic, from defensive and offensive to the philosophy of eighteenth-century wizards. He hungered for more information, his brain devouring tomes upon tomes, searching for anything that caught his fancy.

But maybe…maybe he could take a rest, place his head on the stack of parchment for a moment to gather his bearings. Maybe, he thought as his eyes fell heavy and slipped closed, maybe he…

/ 

The wards didn’t affect Dumbledore, who could sense anyone, anywhere, in the castle; though, he was impressed with the spellwork and strength of the magic around him. It made him suspicious of how a second year, who had been missing class for the past fortnight, could possibly create something like this. Not that Harry wasn’t gifted in magic but based on his professor’s reports, he always seemed bored in class, McGonagall and Flitwick the only professors to say anything different; curious that those were the only two classes Ravenclaw shared with Gryffindor.

Dumbledore found his wayward student surrounded by chaos. He had notes scattered everywhere with books opened to various pages. As he gazed at the organized disaster, Dumbledore couldn’t help but worry about Harry’s mental state. He looked like a boy obsessed, a boy close to losing his mind.

He approached him cautiously, observing him scribble in his notebook, back hunched over the only desk in the room, “My boy, why aren’t you in class?”

He wasn’t expecting the reaction he got.

Harry jumped up, eyes wide like a startled hippogriff, as he hurried to shove his notebook away. “Pro-Professor?! What are you…er…can I help you?”

“My boy, why aren’t you in class?” he repeated his first question a little stern.

Harry didn’t meet his eyes, either out of stubbornness or embarrassment.

Dumbledore made his way further into the study area, making sure not to disturb anything. The
bags under his eyes were starting to resemble that of a raccoon, his robes hanging off him more than usual, his skin a sickly pale, and his eyes a tired dull.

Harry continued to avoid eye contact as he scurried to collect his scattered papers. Dumbledore was able to catch a bit of writing on one that held details on Slytherin’s family. He could guess what the topic of Harry’s research was.

“Children can be cruel to those who are different. I’ve found many times it is not intentional but done out of fear and misunderstandings. Perhaps hiding away is not the best way to handle this situation,” he kindly supplied as he handed Harry one of his books.

The students were scared, even the professors were frightened of the events happening in the school. But unlike the professors who’ve had years of experience and maturity, his students did not.

Harry paused in his clean up, pieces of parchment falling from his hands. He hadn’t really considered how it would look, him disappearing after the attacks but he didn’t really care what the school thought at this point. It was clear they would believe anything painting him as the heir. Why go out of his way trying to convince them otherwise?

Dumbledore gave Harry time to think as the boy put away his research. His silence seemed to prompt Harry into unsure curiosity, his hands gripping his parchment tightly as he voiced his fear.

“Have you ever felt…different, Professor?”

“Different how, Mr. Potter?”

For the first time since he grabbed Harry’s attention, he had his eyes focused on him, imploring for answers.

“Why couldn’t Voldemort kill me that night? He killed my mum and dad…why couldn’t he kill a baby?”

Dumbledore observed him as eyes so like the curse that couldn’t kill him stared back at him, imploring him to answer his question no one but the one responsible could answer. He had his theories of course but there was only one surviving person who could tell the events that happened that night.

“There’s some magic even I do not understand. It’s my belief that when Lily Potter gave her life for you, her only child, she left you with a protection Voldemort could never hope to destroy. Her love saved you, reflecting the curse back onto its caster,” Harry’s hand moved to his scar. “Yes, your scar is the physical reminder of your encounter but Lily’s protection runs deeper than that: it’s inside you.”

“Sir?” Harry hesitated, biting his lip as he gathered his words. “Um…you knew my parents, you were their Headmaster, right?” Harry was looking at his shoes, not really wanting to see the reaction to his next question. “Would they have…uh, would they have –.” He couldn’t get his question out. Just the thought that they too would’ve rejected him was too much to voice.

“Would they have believed and accepted you?” An orphan’s greatest question. “James and Lily were exceptionally kindhearted people who held no greater love than what they shared for you. I am happy to say that if they were alive, James and Lily would both be here, defending you, no matter your ability to speak to snakes.”

Hearing it spoken aloud caused a swell of emotion to rise in Harry’s chest. He knew his parents
had to have loved him, they died defending him, but for things like this, it always made him wonder and long for them. He felt tears roll down his face but he refused to raise his head or acknowledge them.

The Headmaster’s thoughts were brought back to the papers and notebook he had seen earlier, “Is there anything you wish to tell me?” Change the subject for his students’ benefit.

Harry rubbed his sleeve across his face, wiping away the evidence of his tears. He stared right at the Headmaster, almost challengingly in a way, “No sir.”

Stopping short of freezing, the scene reminiscent of one fifty years ago, Dumbledore made his way to the exit with a final parting of words, “Mr. Potter, I fully expect you to be at breakfast tomorrow morning and attend all your classes. I will speak with your professors and you will be exempt from your absences the past fortnight.”

Harry watched as the wrinkled hand rose to push the door open, watching and not seeing the power he knew was hidden in the old bones. The hand paused on its path to the door, just resting on the old wood, not applying any pressure. His voice spoke again, coming out wearier than before, “You will find help, will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it.”

Why did it sound as if the Professor was saying goodbye, Harry thought, as the man finally departed.

/ 

Harry made his first appearance the next morning at breakfast. Still one of the first ones up for breakfast, there weren’t that many people in the Great Hall. But he didn’t see the Headmaster.

He kept his head down, refusing to acknowledge the whispers and not so subtle remarks, gritting his teeth as frustration took over. He’d barely made a dent in his plate before he was pushing away from the table, bag gripped tightly in his hand as he exited the Great Hall, all eyes following his movement, waiting in baited breath for him to do something, anything to prove them right. He didn’t know why it was bothering him so much as he struggled to hold back his tears of frustration.

It wasn’t fair! He’d lost just as much as anyone else!

His hand connected with the hard stone, the pain bringing him a quick release from the anguish and anger he was feeling, the radiating pain demanding his attention as his back hit the wall, sliding down in stuttered movements.

How the hell did things get this bad?

It wasn’t like people had hated him before. While he hadn’t gone out of his way to make friends last year, no one really hated him, most enamored by his story to really get to know him.

His head was too heavy to hold up as it fell forward, resting on his knees as he cradled his hand to his chest, trying to stop the sobs from taking over his body.

He didn’t want to be here!

A phantom feeling on his shoulder had him pause, a sob caught in his chest as his eyes shot up looking for whoever was there.

Almost like a whisper, but so faint he wasn’t sure he even heard it or if it wasn’t his mind playing tricks on him, “Don’t let them see the damage.”
Before he could think on the state of his sanity, Harry heard the hoard of footsteps making their way towards him. Realizing breakfast must be wrapping up, he gathered his bag and stood, wiping any trace of his breakdown and made his way to Charms.

Flitwick gave him a beaming smile, hiding the concern he felt for his student as he came in cradling his hand. Harry didn’t take his normal seat at the front of the class, choosing one in the far corner, away from prying eyes.

Class went by agonizingly slow. Flitwick tried his best but there was nothing he could do to stop the stares. He had already given Finnegan a detention when he heard a smart remark from the young Irish lad, demonstrating to the others that he would not tolerate bullying in his classroom. But he couldn’t punish the students for looking at Harry.

He knew that Charms would be his easiest transition back into school. The other professors, especially McGonagall and Snape, were bound to question him and in Snape’s case, humiliate him. He was already biting his lip open from anxiety at the mere thought of what Potions was going to be like tomorrow.

Flitwick held him back after the double period had ended, motioning him to his office where they could speak more privately. As his Head of House, there were certain things he had to talk to Harry about.

Harry took the offered seat, staring straight ahead at the certificates of dueling excellence lining the walls. It wasn’t his first time in this office but it was the first time he had dreaded a conversation with the half-goblin. The man had been someone he admired with all his achievements and his fairness. Flitwick, though easily excitable, valued hard work and dedication. He had seen a potential in Harry and worked to get him to realize it. With Hermione’s help, he had. But Defense had always been his intrigue, the subject that called to him. After the Dueling Club fiasco, Flitwick had pulled him aside to offer a few tips, having heard about his performance. He was impressed that that was his first time in a duel and had invited him to ask him any questions about the art.

“Mr. Potter, I hope you realize why it is I called you in here? You’ve been missing from classes for a fortnight and I was recently informed that you have not been seen in your dorm either.”

*Snitches,* Harry thought viciously.

“Are you being bullied? I can make accommodations if you chose.”

His dorm mates had never been the problem. It was too confining, too much noise, too many people looking at him, examining him. The thing about Ravenclaws was that anything remotely interesting became the object of research. He couldn’t move anywhere in the tower without someone’s eyes on him. It would drive any rational person insane.

Harry itched his arm absentmindedly as he shook his head negatively.

“Then why were you gone? You could’ve been attacked and how could we have known?!” his voice squeaked out, anger seeping through for the first time.

Again, Harry said nothing. He had nothing to say, his actions the last two weeks speaking for themselves.

Flitwick let out a sign of defeat. There was nothing he could do, the Headmaster having made it perfectly clear that no punishment was to be administered when Harry returned to classes, saying he had already talked with the boy.
“Whatever is going on with you, my door is always open. Anything you say to me is confidential and won’t be repeated.”

Harry reframed from snorting. He knew all about student-teacher confidentiality. The one time he had trusted a teacher with the secret of what the Dursley’s were doing to him, they had informed Vernon of his accusations right away. He had spent the next months in the cupboard with only supper. He wouldn’t make that mistake again but Flitwick was trying so that gave him some kudos.

Seeing the end of the conversation, Harry grabbed his bag, moving his hand to scratch at his neck before thanking the man.

He really should’ve expected it sooner but he’d tried so hard to just get through the day. His bag tearing and the contents spilling was the least of his problems as he was shoved against the wall harshly, back digging into the familiar stone he had leaned against earlier. Rough hands had him struggling, pushing out and kicking. This was familiar, too familiar, and he wanted desperately to get away. The hands tightened in his shirt, yanking forward to meet his assailant. It wasn’t anyone he recognized but someone who was definitely an older year. His green eyes cut into brown, shining with his hatred but refusing to show just how scared he was in that moment.

It must’ve annoyed the boy as his head was meeting the hard stone a second later; he collapsed to the ground, hands moving to cradle the injury, already feeling hot, sticky blood coating his hair, his ears echoing with ringing.

“If you try anything, we’ll make sure you get worse,” the teenager spat, kicking at his belonging scattering the floor.

No one moved to help him, all standing in a circle, watching like he was some animal on display for their entertainment. Red hot anger boiled in his veins, an emotion so strong he had never felt before. His eyes narrowed at their retreating forms, willing him to trip down the stairs. He didn’t take his eyes off him, magic rising up, seconds from…

What was he doing? Since when did he stoop to their level?

His magic cut off but not quick enough. The teenager tripped but not enough to fall, enough to laugh off as clumsiness. But for those with keen eyes, they had noticed the intensity of his stare and made connections they were too scared to speak aloud.

Instead of worrying about it, Harry moved to collect his belongings that had been scattered about, holding one hand to his occipital bone where he knew most of the damage had taken place. He would need to see Madam Pomfrey.

Light footsteps reached his ringing ears, wand already out, not willing to be part of another attack. But he had nothing to worry about. Kind, chocolate eyes found his, giving a small smile as she helped collect his things. She had only caught the last part of the confrontation but trusted that her brothers were already working on getting revenge for Harry. Fred and George had a little soft spot for the orphaned boy, which showed in their pranks. Any friend of Ginny’s had to be alright, plus he was an amazing Quidditch player. All pluses in their book.

Harry pinched his eyes shut as the pain radiated outwards, white filling his vision. Ginny gathered what she could as quickly as possible to shove in his bag, taking notice of a familiar black notebook and freezing, a cold washing over her like all her fears had been realized. A pit opening up in her stomach and filling with everything she had ever confided to Tom filling it up and
overflowing into her lungs, choking out her breath as she struggled to come back to reality –

“Yes…”

His raspy voice brought her back, grounding her in the present and the situation at hand. Dumping the material to hide the cursed notebook, she gently helped him up, almost falling over as his legs buckled under his weight. Luckily, she caught them before either of them could injure themselves.

If this was how difficult the walk to the Hospital Wing was going to be, she prayed for someone to help. Almost as if someone was listening, a significant portion of Harry’s weight was lifted. Turning to see, she was surprised to see Luna on Harry’s other side.

Luna only shot her a dreamy smile, her radish earrings dangling as she pulled Harry’s right arm over her shoulder.

“Was it the Nargles?” Ginny asked, not unkindly.

Luna had this funny way of knowing exactly where to be and what to do. Ginny had given up asking her how and instead responds with “Was it the Nargles?” to which Luna always smiles a little brighter and confirms that, yes, it was the Nargles.

“Next stop, the Hospital Wing!”

The two Ravenclaws and single Gryffindor started their journey to the Hospital Wing, Harry oddly quiet but Ginny wasn’t that concerned. His head looked pretty bad. No, her mind was fixated on the innocent little notebook tucked away mere inches from her and the possibilities of Tom having got to Harry.

The upper years who had attacked him had been reported and were apparently Hufflepuff sixth years. As acting Headmistress, McGonagall has ripped into the two who had been the main assailants, resulting in detention for the rest of the year with Filch. Professor Sprout had also dealt her own punishment, banning them from all school activities, including Quidditch.

Madam Pomfrey had managed to heal his wound and stop the bleeding but she had been concerned about the possibility of a concession after he explained his vision had gone white. Her instructions were to take it easy and to stay awake for the next few hours and if he felt anything weird, to come to her.

She tutted and tisked at him, examining how much weight he had lost the last few weeks and the darkness under his eyes. She gave him a nutrition potion along with instructions to eat three full meals a day. She even went as far as threatening to track him down and force feed him if she found out he skipped a meal.

Harry only rolled his eyes, used to her hovering nitpicking but it did feel nice to have some nagging him because they cared. So he promised her he would eat more.

Worried eyes followed his retreat. There was something different about Harry besides his health. Something inside him had changed, she thought as his hand moved to scratch his arm.

Things hadn’t calmed down but they hadn’t escalated either. He left everyone alone and they left him alone. It was an arrangement that favored everyone except his Quidditch team apparently who
took to sitting with him at meals, talking at, to, and around him. He didn’t know how they could act like nothing had happened but they did a pretty good job of pretending.

But the one place he could lose them: the Library.

It also happened to be the only place he could still talk to Tom. He had tried going back to the fourth floor but there had been nothing there. He figured Dumbledore had something to do with it.

So, here he was, looking for a book Tom had recommended he read. There had been something different about Tom since his meeting with Dumbledore; they hadn’t been able to duel or interact properly since that night.

It took him some time to find the book, it having been recently used by another student most likely studying for their NEWTS.

Flipping through the pages, he glanced up when his table came into view, running the rest of the way when he saw the state of his bag that had clear signs of being rummaged through. Harry dropped the tome to the side, looking frantically through all his books and papers. It wasn’t there! Someone had taken it!

His head snapped up, looking around desperately for anyone that could’ve taken it but it was pointless. He chose this spot for a reason and that was because it was away from the regular traffic of the library.

Someone knew he had Tom’s diary, which meant he was being watched…but that also meant whoever took it knew what it did. It had to be whoever tried to throw it away.

Dammit! Tom had never told him who he talked with last. Somehow it never came up in their conversations.

“Confronting the Faceless? This is a little advanced for you, don’t you think?”

Harry spun around, wand raised, only relaxing when he saw it as Derrick.

“You’re a bit jumpy. Everything okay?” Derrick slowly put the book down, looking at Harry in concern.

A bit ashamed, Harry ran his hand through his hair, placing his wand on the table. “Yeah, just, someone just went through my things.” He indicated to the disheveled bag.

This alarmed Derrick as no one had actually attempted to take Harry’s things before. Mess around and cause trouble, yes, but never actually taking anything.

“Did they take anything? Do you want me to get Professor Flitwick?”

Harry hesitated. He couldn’t say what was taken. No one knew about the notebook and he couldn’t exactly tell them about it. He was sure he’d get scolded for not reporting it.

“No, just messed my assignments up. No point in going to Flitwick,” he mumbled, stuffing his things back into his bag. A hand stopped him from moving it to his shoulder.

“Harry – just talk to me!” Derrick grip tightened on the worn fabric as he pleaded. “I know things are hard right now but stop pushing me away! Do you want to alone?!”

“Just leave it, Derrick.” He tried to pull his shoulder from Derrick’s grip.
“No! You think you can push everyone away and no one will fight for you!” Derrick fully took the bag now, “I’m not everyone and I don’t care if you don’t want my help, you’re getting it.” He was angry, angrier than Harry had ever seen him.

“Why can’t you just leave me alone, huh? Why do you have to keep sticking your nose in my business? I don’t need your help!” There was a snarl at his lips, words on the tip of his tongue he knew he would regret but not caring at this moment, wanting someone else to hurt just as badly as he did.

“Someone has to since you seem incapable of doing it yourself!” Realizing just how out of hand their conversation had gotten, Derrick held out the bag, offering it to Harry who seemed to deflate. “You don’t get to choose the people who care about you, Harry.” Dropping the bag on to the table when Harry didn’t immediately take it, Derrick moved, walking to the exit of the library.

Harry felt that something had shifted in their relationship. He didn’t understand why he had gotten so angry with Derrick. It wasn’t anything new, the seventh year butting in on his life. He’d been doing it for months, so why did it bother him this time?

He wanted to run over and apologize but he couldn’t make his feet move. Maybe some space would fix the strain? Harry hoped as he gathered up his bag, forgetting the book he had come for, scratching again at his arm, the sleeve riding up to show inflamed scratches.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Enter the Chamber of Secrets

/ 
"...let me rip...let me kill this time...I'm coming..."

Harry startled at the sudden hissing echoing around him. He was in the library again, after having taken a quick lunch. He was trying to get some last minute studying in for Transfiguration which was his first exam on Monday.

He rummaged around for the mirror he had taken to keeping in his bag, taking note of Hermione's precaution and being the only one to realize why she had the mirror out: Better petrified than dead. Wand in one hand, mirror in the other, Harry moved cautiously through the bookshelves. It was moving through the walls, more specifically, the pipes but that didn't mean it couldn't exit them.

"...I smell him...let me tear...bit by bit..."

Harry swallowed the lump that formed in his throat. It was looking for him. He had to find someone, anyone. It wouldn't attack if there were more people. He moved the mirror, angling it to see around the corner when he saw a flash of red reflected from behind him. He didn't have a chance to turn around as he was hit with a spell.

"Stupefy."

The sound of shattering glass accompanied the thud of Harry's body hitting the floor. His attacker levitated his body out of the library, passing a stunned Madam Pince.

/ 
"And where is Potter? He seems to have a habit of turning up around these attacks?" Snape drawled, lip curling in apparent disgust at the thought of Harry, raising an eyebrow almost challengingly for someone to dispute his claim.

"Severus!"

The reprimand was quick from Minerva, who was tired of the antagonism between the Potion's Master and the Ravenclaw, having dealt with Severus twice already about the boy and his apparent 'lack of self-accountability in his dudder-head brain'. Any further comment was cut off by Septima Vector, "Where is Irma?"

This got all the staff's attention. Irma Pince was never one to be late or dawdle. She was as punctual in her schedule as she was in the return of her books. Uncertainty seeped into a few of their eyes at the thought of one of their own being attacked. The atmosphere had become dark since the Headmaster's sacking and Minerva had already been contacted by the board to make the announcement that Hogwarts would be shutting down once the school year ended. With this recent
attack, they would be sending the kids home tomorrow no doubt.

"Severus, perhaps you can –"

Minerva was cut off once again but this time by the appearance of the Bloody Baron, Slytherin's elusive ghost. "Madam Pince has been attacked," his gravelly voice informed them, "A student appears to have been taken as well."

"Yes, we know. Ginny Weasley was taken –"

"No," his chains rattled as he stared at Minerva, the Headmistress, "Another student." She felt her blood turn cold as her mind supplied the name; there was no other person, no other option. Snape's claim had not been unfounded it seems. "Harry Potter's belonging are abandoned next to a shattered mirror in the library."

With his message given, the Baron exited to the dungeons, not staying to see the chaos he left with his few words.

Minerva's face drained of colour, Flitwick looked like he was about to fall over, and Snape's eye's gained a calculating gleam.

It was no coincidence that both Potter and Weasley were taken. Were they together when it happened or is this another message? Potter had been at the center of this the entire year and then a few weeks ago he begins to act strangely and now this? Severus didn't believe in coincidences. If he didn't know any better, he'd have bet the boy had been possessed during that time but unfortunately he had known his father who had been prone to ill becoming behaviour. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

But it did beg the question: Who was behind these attacks? Before his departure, Dumbledore had been certain that this was Voldemort's work. His arm twitched at the reminder. If the Dark Lord was involved somehow, it was not physically as his Dark Mark was still as faded as it has been these last eleven years.

Was the boy already dead?

Was his corpse lying in the chamber with that of Weasley's?

Was he to fail Lily in her death as he had in her life?

He thought of the boy and how there was no one family member or guardian to even inform of the situation. How the boy was utterly alone and if not for his fame, would anyone care to notice him missing?

Had he done enough to protect him?

He cast those thoughts aside, speculation would get him nowhere. At this moment, their priority was ensuring the student's safety. He turned his full attention to Minerva, who was giving out instructions for tomorrow’s assured closure.

Their attention turned to the noisy entrance of the only other missing staff member...Lockhart.

"So sorry, what did I miss?"

A sneer curled at Snape's lip, looking upon the pompous man with disgust.
Minerva shared his contempt it seemed as she looked down her nose at the DADA professor who was over ten minutes late for the emergency staff meeting, "Two students have been taken."

Lockhart seemed to freeze before he could catch himself, "Dreadful, dreadful news. And they are?" He had regained his composure but Snape was satisfied to see he was a few shades paler and had developed a twitch in his facial muscles. His brave façade was broken.

"Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter."

"How unfortunate. If only there was something we could do." He was twitching again, his legs just itching to run away.

The atmosphere in the staffroom seemed to condense at the careless way the words were thrown around, the man so uncaring of the welfare of his students.

The remaining professors and staff seemed to finally rebel, the room seeming to darken as Snape stepped forward, his condescending bite bringing smiles to the faces of everyone but Lockhart, “Your moment has finally come. Weren’t you saying just last night that you’ve known all along where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is?"

Lockhart’s lips twitched into a false smile that did not reach his eyes, “Yes, yes. Quite right you are Severus. I’ll…I’ll…I must prepare.” His voice shook in false confidence as he ran from the room.

Murmurs broke out of ‘good riddance’ and ‘thank Merlin’.

With the insect taken care of, Snape excused himself. He was no good standing around here doing nothing. As of right now, the remaining students are safe in their dormitories where a professor will be occupying for the night. He directed Septima to take his position in the Slytherin dorms.

“I have something to check on.” With that he swept out of the room, not waiting to see if his orders were followed. Minerva followed after him but not after quick instructions of her own.

"Severus!" she called after him, "You know, or at least suspect something."

He wouldn't tell her what Dumbledore had confided to him, knowing the best secret is the one no one knew. But she was a strong witch and it was one of her students that was missing.

"I only have speculations but I need to see Potter's belongings. There may be something there that can help us." For some reason, his mind kept going back to possession. Potter had acted too out of character for this to be a coincidence and the knowledge he had acquired in those two weeks he had been missing…something didn’t add up. He couldn’t even go to Dumbledore with his suspicions because the man had gotten himself removed from the school! He was hoping that Potter had left something in his belongings, anything that could help.

"These attacks, there've only been concentrated on a single target. This breaks the pattern, a simultaneous attack. Legend has there being a single monster. Weasley was last seen over an hour ago and Potter was seen making his way to the library after lunch. There would be little time to take both of them which means – ”

"Whoever is behind these attacks has shown themselves."

"Precisely. But every student has been accounted for."

"And you think Mr. Potter's belongings will hold clues to who it was that attacked him?" There was doubt in her voice but Severus knew she never saw Potter how he did. There was too much of his
father in him for the Gryffindor head to look at him clearly.

"Potter has held a great many secrets and I believe he has been specifically targeted." His cloak billowed behind him as he increased his pace as the library came into view.

They entered the Library, eyes narrowing in on the petrified body of Irma Pince, Minerva moving to revive her while Severus moved on, catching the scattered material that could only belong to Potter. Bending down, he ran his wand over the pile, pursing his lips when nothing came back. He stepped back, foot crunching on a piece of glass. Sweeping his cloak aside, Snape found the glass was actually a mirror, a broken mirror.

If he didn't dislike the boy so much, he would compliment him, the pieces finally coming together. Granger had a similar mirror when she was found which could only mean it meant something if Potter also had one. And if he was using it, that meant he had reason to believe he would be attacked. The boy was a parselmouth and the voice he had spoken of hearing on Halloween could only be that of a serpent if he was the only one to hear it.

A mirror, the petrification...the beast was a basilisk.

Hadn't Hagrid said something had been killing the roosters?

But why take Weasley if Potter was the end game? Was she supposed to be a distraction? The boy had known and said nothing.

"Well?"

Snape moved his eyes to McGonagall slowly, eyebrows raised.

She only huffed, "I know that look. You forget; I taught you for seven years before you became a professor."

He knew he had to choose his words carefully, "I believe the beast is a Basilisk. Something Potter and Granger no doubt discovered as they both had mirrors."

He ignored the gasp of fear, focusing on the librarian who was a little unsteady but making her way to them.

"It was her. She acted so different but those eyes -! Her eyes were red!"

Minerva was the first to react, reaching to steady the woman and calm her before she could work herself into hysterics but he wanted to know what she meant.

"Who? Who was she?"

Pince took a shaky breath, insides still like ice as she struggled to regain her bearings. Whatever spell had been used on her was no ordinary petrification spell.

"Ms. Weasley."

Minerva's hands flew to her mouth as her eyes widened in shock. Snape did nothing to show the announcement had affected him expected narrow his eyes even further. With her hysteria, he was able to slip into her mind and see for himself the image that was causing her such distress.

His body turned ice cold as his forearm throbbed with a pain he hadn’t felt in a decade. He would know the eyes anywhere.
Voldemort was back and in possession of the youngest Weasley and not Potter.

Harry came to in a dark, damp chamber. His head was spinning like he'd been attacked by the Whomping Willow or a rogue bludger again.

It was dark, almost too dark to see but there was just enough torchlight that he could make out the vastness of the chamber. Sitting up, Harry could say that the stories had no parallel to actually being in the chamber itself because there was no doubt in his mind that he was in the Chamber of Secrets. If the rows of serpents weren't enough, the towering statue of Slytherin himself was a dead giveaway.

The silence wasn't something he was fond of but it told him that the basilisk wasn't near. It did little to comfort him as the Heir was most likely nearby, watching him, waiting to make his move. His only question left was why he was alive.

Getting to his feet, the absence of his wand was heavy as his eyes darted around. He could see a body closer to the statue of Slytherin…had another student been taken? He moved wearily towards the unmoving figure, wholly aware that his wand was missing from his person and feeling naked and defenceless for it. He scratched again at the persistent itch on his arm, creating more marks to join the fresh scabs.

His heart and hand stopped when he saw the red hair fanned out, soaked to a dark red, a blood red, "Ginny!?" He ran the rest of the way, disregarding the fact that their kidnapper was nowhere to be seen.

It was Ginny, he would recognize her hair anywhere! But what was she doing down here? Why take her? Was this a game with the Heir, taking his friends?

"She won't wake." A calm, soothing, voice sounded to the side. It was a familiar voice, one he hadn't heard in weeks but could still recognize with the ease one could an old friend after years apart.

"Tom? How are you – What's happening?"

Nothing made sense. Tom was a memory so how could he be outside the diary in a physical form? No, it wasn't physical...his edges were blurry. Corporal form then. He'd never been able to do that when they were together; had something changed?

He couldn't focus on that right now. For the first time in weeks, his attention was solely on his best friend, the person who had stuck by him through everything. And like that, he regretted all the fights, all the arguments, everything he had done these last few weeks to her. His hand hesitated as he moved to touch her, scared of what he would find. She was so pale, so lifeless. Choking down a swallow, his trembling hand lightly touched her cheek,

"Ginny, she's cold...we need to get her out of here, Tom!" There was urgency in his voice as his hands fully cupped the young Gryffindor's face. For the first time since he woke in this chamber, true fear was reflected in those dilated green eyes.

That was what he wanted to hear, to hear Harry beg for his help again, to realize that he was nothing without Tom. But more than that, that if he so asked, Tom would fix whatever was the issue.

"I can't do that Harry," Tom answered calmly with remorse lacing his every word, moving closer,
his eyes never straying from his prey.

Harry heard what Tom said and in his panic, failed to realize that the emotion Tom was projecting failed to reach his eyes. Instead, he called out desperately, trying again, "She's dying, Tom!"

What was happening to her? They couldn't have been down here a long time so why was she so cold? None of it made sense! And again, how was Tom here? Harry tried to bring Ginny into his arms but her body provided too much resistance and he was left cradling her head in her lap, wetness creeping into his clothes the longer he sat.

Tom studied him and Harry felt like his soul was bared for him to poke and prod. Why wasn't Tom helping him!? All that time they spent –

"You're different from what I expected. We're more alike than I first thought," he admitted, almost carelessly, a smile beginning to stretch across his face. For the first time since they had met, Harry felt unsure about the memory.

Tom stepped closer and apprehension began to fill Harry. His body wanted to move back but he had to stay with Ginny. His eyes were searching, hungry, wanting, demanding more.

"Those books, you never questioned the content, never believed it was wrong. I know your deepest feelings," Tom circled Harry, almost like a predator, the calmness never leaving his face, "Dumbledore would never approve but I can help you – I can teach you!"

Things weren't adding up – Tom, Ginny, the Chamber – none of it.

"How are you here Tom?" Harry dreaded the answer, knew deep down what it would be. The chamber, Tom, the diary next to Ginny…

A twisted smile took over his handsome face, turning it ugly before shifting back to the indifferent smirk as he looked coolly down at him.

"I never expected you to discover my diary. Ever since Ginny told me your story, I was most anxious to meet you, befriend you if I could." Harry could swear he saw a flash of red reflected in those eyes. "You exceeded my expectations and proved to be one of my more – gifted – followers."

The Dursley's betrayal hadn't hurt as bad as this. The declaration that someone he had trusted had manipulated and used him. It was the only confirmation he needed, where all the pieces started to fall into place.

"Ginny – she was – you helped me – it was you? All this time and it was you?" Though he had guessed it, it did nothing to alleviate the sting as he grasped at threads, breathing out in disbelief.

"Ginny poured her heart and soul into a diary because she was lonely. But you," Tom finished his circle around him, staring cruelly at Harry, "Loneliness doesn't bother you. You needed direction, answers! And I could provide both. I took you under my wing, crafted you into what you are today."

"All this time, you were using me – pointing me away when it was really you!" Harry twisted his body to follow the Slytherin's movements, making sure he remained between him and his friend the entire time. The stiffness of her body was like a hammer in the back of his mind, reminding him of what little time he had.

"I wasn't using you, Harry. I was making you strong, showing you how they were holding you back from your true potential!" Harry felt like he was being mocked as Tom sung him praise as his
friend lay dying at his feet.

Ginny, sweet, vicious Ginny who was the first to his defence and he had never once noticed her struggling. Never saw a difference in her behaviour. He had been a horrible friend. He shook that thought out of his head and focused on getting more information.

"How did you convince Ginny to open the Chamber?"

"You know I can be very persuasive, Harry." Riddle stepped back. "I want you by my side, Harry. What we have…together, nothing, no one, could stand in our way! You'd never have to return to that orphanage. You'd have the respect you deserve!"

Harry shook his head back and forth in disbelief, knowing that only hours ago he would've agreed to the offer. Would've trusted Tom; Tom who knew his innermost secrets and desires to escape the orphanage, the life of isolation and contempt. But he couldn't, he would never agree to Tom's way. All his classmates, Hermione and now Ginny…when did it stop?

"You killed someone Tom, you've hurt people." Maybe if he could just get him to see that this wasn't the way...

"Progress requires sacrifice…you know this."

It was spoken softly as Tom regarded Harry through his lashes.

Sacrifice. He knew about sacrifice. About loneliness. And regret. But he had also experienced the world in a way he had never experienced before. Through Ginny and Hermione and Derrick and all the people he had befriended this year, he had come to realize that there was so much more. He remembered the boy who had attacked him and how he had stopped himself from retaliating. He was better than that. It was something he had thought he had shared with Tom with their similar upbringing: To be better than their tormentors.

A silence passed over them. One, Tom was only too happy to extend. He was curious to see how long it would take for Harry to connect everything. And he wasn't disappointed.

It was a bone-deep chill that took over when the realization struck him, the absence of the monster serpent the last puzzle piece. He would gladly take a bludger to the head a hundred times for this to be wrong but Tom never did anything without a reason. It was a whisper at the back of his mind, growing louder and louder until his brain grabbed the information and forced it into place.

"You're a parsleemouth…you're Voldemort!" Harry breathed at the realization, voice barely holding back a crack.

Tom just continued to smile, not denying the accusation. It was conjecture, had always been, and the main reason Dumbledore could never prove anything. But the time for kids games was over.

"I created a new name, a name I knew everyone would one day fear when I became the greatest sorcerer in the world!" His chest puffed out as he stood to his full high, looming over Harry.

Harry refused to be cowered, this was his friend.

"But you're not…even now, you're still scared of Dumbledore. All those times you talked about him…you were scared he'd find out about you." Harry couldn't muster the hatred he knew he should feel for Tom – Voldemort. The poor, orphan boy who would one day grow to kill his mother and father. The teenager had been his friend, his confidant.
"Dumbledore's been driven out of this castle by the mere memory of me. A child did what he spent years unable to achieve!"

There it was. Why did everyone assume he was the one to have defeated Voldemort? No one had been there but four people. For all he knew, his mother could've done a protection ritual. There was nothing special about him, nothing that gave substance to all the stories and the legend surrounding him. He was and always has been, just Harry.

Tom was right though, Dumbledore was gone, sacked. He'd known what the teachers had concluded weeks ago – without Dumbledore, the school was even more vulnerable. He'd left them, knowing that the attacks would only escalate, had done nothing, had left without a word –

"Help will always be given to those who ask for it."

"He may be gone but the professors and students still trust him." In the deepest parts of him, parts that yearned for someone to listen to him, to help him, he knew he trusted Dumbledore. The man was the most powerful wizard and he controlled himself in ways Harry could only dream of one day doing. It was magic that washed over him, saturating the air, and almost calmness settling in the man's presence. Call it pettiness, youthful folly, a mistrust built on a ruined youth, but he couldn't bring himself to trust the adults in his life who had let him down, and those he could he found himself unable to vocalize. To know it internally was different than having it spoken aloud. It became real, with real consequences and expectations once something like that was out in the open.

Tom didn't let it show, the satisfaction of hearing Harry speak. While that may be true, the boy had neglected to add himself onto that list. That was all the confirmation he needed that he had a chance with the boy.

"You forget, I know you're darkest thoughts. I have seen your soul Harry Potter, and it is mine," he purred, words hissing out in delight as those eyes flashed red as the foul smile took over the once handsome face.

Tom finally drew his wand and Harry wasn't surprised to see his own Holly wand. He opened his mouth to speak but froze.

Music filled the chamber; spine-tingling, unearthly music that filled his heart with hope, with courage. It grew louder and louder and flames erupted at the top of the nearest pillar, revealing the crimson bird that Harry had only seen on his burning day.

"Fawkes?" he breathed as the phoenix flew towards him.

Tom shot off a curse at the phoenix, recognizing it as Dumbledore's, and it went up in flames. Harry's hope died with the disappearance of Fawkes.

"We could've been great, you and me, Harry Potter," Tom said softly as he turned to the statue of Slytherin himself, almost in regret, "I'll give you a look at my beast before you die."

Harry was reluctant to leave Ginny but at this point, he would be a sitting duck once the basilisk appeared. Parseltongue slipped from Tom's mouth, filling the chamber. It was disorientating, finally hearing the language spoken by another. He felt a pull to stand by his side, command the beast to finish Salazar Slytherin's work. It was a part of him he shoved down, ignoring in favour of running in the opposite direction of the statue.

He could hear the mighty beast as it exited its resting place, coiling and curling as it awaited its
"Parseltongue won't save you now Harry; it only obeys me!"

Gritting his teeth, Harry willed his legs to move faster. Now was not the time to find out if Basilisks liked human.

The chamber was flooded, stone slick with water, and feeling smaller and smaller, darker and confined. Was this his tomb?

Cursing as his foot slipped on the flooded floor, he caught himself with his hands before he could smash his face onto the stone. Using his new position, he pivoted to the left, feeling the air displace where he once was and hearing the massive weight crash to the floor.

Puffing and glasses smeared with water, Harry tried to reach the nearest pipe, hoping it was too small for the Basilisk to follow. He sucked in a deep breath, filling his lungs with oxygen as he pushed his burning legs faster, the muscles protesting at the acceleration.

Merlin, Harry thought, don't let me die down here!

Would anyone even look for him or would they assume he ran off after killing Ginny? Did anyone even know he was gone? He had been alone in the library so there was a chance no one knew he was missing. That was the story of his life. No one to even miss him.

His heart felt like it was about to pound right out of his chest, the sound of blood rushing through his ears as he was forced to pause to catch his breath.

Hand leaning against the slick stone, his entire frame froze as a monstrous shadow fell over him, the torches lining the wall giving him an idea of just how massive the beast was. He could only watch as the shadow opened its mouth, it's fangs on full display as it prepared for the kill.

He wasn't going to make it!

He shut his eyes tightly, ducking his head under his arms as if that would stop the pain.

....

Trilling echoed in the vast chamber, bringing with it hope and strength. It was enough for Harry to lift his head, give him a fighting spirit not to lay down and accept death. He focused on the wall where the shadowed form of the basilisk lay and saw how Fawkes appeared above the serpents head, diving for an attack. Not wasting the time given to him, Harry sent a silent thanks to the phoenix and took off, putting as much distance between them as he could, heart rate picking back up as adrenaline flooded his system yet again.

He had evaded the basilisk but that wasn't the worst of his problems. He knew Tom was strong, having learned from him for a month, and that wasn't even considering the fact that he was a young Voldemort while he, Harry, was wandless and alone.

The pipes all led back to the main chamber, something Tom had most likely known if his careless expression was anything to go by. A shine of pride was hidden in those dark eyes as they followed his form as he emerged undefeated from the pipes, having successfully evaded his beast.
He ran to Ginny, ignoring the teenager for a moment, hoping that she was still alive. Her pulse was very faint and her lips were already blue; she was close, if not minutes, from death.

"I must thank you for your part in this achievement. Compared to yours, little Ginny's soul was rather weak. You gave me the strength I needed to finally complete five decades of planning." That grin was mocking him. His pearly white, perfect teeth, flashing briefly behind equally perfect lips. "All I needed was Dumbledore gone."

Harry glared at him, aware of his own wand being held against him. The teenager was clearer around the edges, less blurry. He threw a helpless glance down at Ginny. The hatred he knew he should feel was beginning to awaken, a flame growing deep inside of him the longer he looked at his dying friend.

But there was nothing he could do, he had been outplayed, maneuvered into a corner. If it came down to it, he wasn't above begging, which is what he had been reduced to, "Please, don't."

Don't do this. Don't take her away. Don't betray him like everyone else.

Tom just looked at him with compassionate eyes, eyes Harry wasn't sure could be trusted anymore, eyebrows scrunched together as if he really felt sorry for him.

"I cannot."

The basilisk burst from one of the pipes, hissing madly, body whipping back and forth in agitation.

He closed his mouth: if this was going to be his last stand, he wasn't going to hide. He would be brave, like his parents before him. Standing tall, Harry grasped the discarded Sorting Hat Fawkes must have dropped when he first appeared. Chin held high, he stared down the blind Basilisk, seeing the damage Fawkes had done to protect him.

At least the beast could never kill or petrify another person, he took some solace in this minute victory.

Grime covered hands began to tremble as the monster got closer, chest heaving in fear but still, he refused to back down, to cower.

The basilisk blindly lunged, following Riddle's hissed directions. Harry dodged as it hit the chamber wall, pieces of stone collapsing with the impact.

The hat sagged in his hand as if suddenly weighed down. His hand came away with a jewel-studded sword, a sword only ever described in books: the Sword of Gryffindor! Harry let out a choked laugh of disbelief, hope blossoming in his chest.

Righting itself, the serpent posed to lunge again. Ready, Harry lifted the sword to defend himself.

It was a second…a pause…before –

…

Pain, unimaginable pain like he had never felt before ripped through his body. One long, poisonous fang sinking deeper and deeper into his arm, splintering when the giant serpent keeled over sideways. Harry fell with the basilisk, the spasms in his arm making him unable to release his grip on the sword currently embedded in the roof of the serpent's mouth. Green eyes were directly in line with the massive head of the basilisk, where he could smell the rot on its breath. Thankfully, the fall dislodged his hand from the sword and using his non-injured one, he ripped the fang out of
his arm, watching in fascination as blood flowed freely from the wound, dripping down his arm and onto the floor, mixing with the puddled water at his feet.

It was too late, he knew that. He could already see the poison spreading through his veins, turning them black as it crawled up his basilica vein, making its way to his heart and other major organs. With all the research he'd done on these creatures, he knew he was dead. His vision was already fogging, his limbs weighted.

At least the basilisk can never hurt anyone again, Harry thought as he slid further to the ground.

Footsteps echoed throughout the chamber as they drew nearer to his crippled form, a shadow stopping in front of him.

Tom crouched down to his level, a look of regret – that can't be right – crossing his face as he took in his boy.

"You have been defeated, Harry. It only takes minutes for the venom of a basilisk to spread. I gave you a chance. This is what happens when you refuse Lord Voldemort." His hand outstretched to the discarded fang. It was a pity the beast had to die but he had no use for it anymore, it had served its purpose.

This wasn't supposed to happen. He'd wanted the boy by his side, not dying. The basilisk was meant as a challenge, to give him enough time for the energy from Ginny to transfer into him completely.

A trill came from above as Fawkes reappeared in a burst of flames, swooping down to Harry's side, landing on blood-soaked pant leg, head tilting to the side in consideration.

Harry couldn't tell if it was his vision going but Tom looked less blurry, more solid around the edges. The world started spinning, his body feeling like it was endlessly falling. Claws dug into his ripped sleeve but he couldn't even muster the strength to thank Fawkes for his help.

"Even Dumbledore's bird knows it. Look as he weeps for your impending death." Tom moved closer into his space, his now solid hand cupping his chin tenderly, thumb passing over his cheek as one would a lover. "You'll join your Mudblood mother soon enough. In the end, you were no match for Lord Voldemort."

That sounded pretty nice, as long as this pain went away. If this was dying, it didn't seem so bad. He felt light, the pain fading…but that wasn't right? The chamber was coming back into focus. Blinking his eyes quicker than before, Harry made out the form of Tom Riddle in front of him, he could feel the warm hand on his face. Strange…he thought it'd be cold. Those steel blue eyes weren't focused on his face, instead, they were looking at his wound…or where it used to be.

"I forgot…phoenix tears have healing powers," he spoke to himself. Strangely enough, he didn't seem mad over it, that he was going to survive when minutes before he was lamenting on his impending death. The warm hand caressed his skin as it brushed his neck before taking it in a strong grip, Harry's own wand at his neck, "Survive and seek me out," was whispered into his ears and the Slytherin’s eyes dilated in ecstasy, breath coming in warm puffs against his cheek.

A burning pain erupted from where the hand was pressed. He was released in seconds, his neck burning in agony.

"You are mine, Harry Potter." Harry shuddered at the parting words of his enemy, whispered into his ear, warm breath tickling his skin. It wasn't a promise, it was a declaration.
The poison neutralized from his system, Harry walked his exhausted body to where he knew Ginny had been. His brain had already worked out what a solid Tom meant but he had to confirm it for himself. It was torture for him and he did it on purpose; Ginny had been his friend and she was dead because of him. If he had been able to defeat Tom, she would be alive. Instead, he was weak and allowed himself to be manipulated.

She was stone cold. Her lips already blue, her freckles standing out on her ash white face.

A sob escaped from his mouth before he could stop it. More soon followed as the reality of the situation overcame him. Voldemort had won...he had beat him in the most intimidate and cruel ways. Harry wished he had allowed him to die. The pain was unbearable, worse than the basilisk venom that burnt through his body only moments before.

He would never see those sparkling brown eyes again, never hear her vicious hexes, or her ringing laughter. Never play against her in Quidditch or hear the stories of her brothers. He would never be able to see how dark he could make her blush and he never got to count how many freckles she had dusting her kind face.

Fawkes let out a mournful melody, circling Riddle's collateral damage. The melody echoed through the chamber, pairing perfectly with the gut-wrenching sobs of the twelve-year-old.

The freshly burnt serpent coiled tightly into itself before settling motionlessly onto the boy’s neck, marking him for all to see as Voldemort’s.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Aftermath and recovery

Harry allowed Fawkes to take them back to the castle. His grip never wavering on Ginny. They appeared in the Headmaster's office and with enough time to realize he was safe, Harry succumb to the comfort of oblivion.

For two days he laid unconscious in the Hospital Wing as the school scrambled to cope with the devastating news. The teachers were preparing to send everyone home early, the petrified students having been awaken the day before.

For two days, Dumbledore stopped by to observe the boy he had failed.

For two days, Dumbledore wondered about the mark on Harry's neck.

For two days, Dumbledore feared Voldemort was once again amongst them.

For two days, Dumbledore wept for the loss of Ginny Weasley.

After two days, the boy with the mark on his face awoke. It wasn't one of those instant wake-ups where everything came rushing back to him. This one he struggled to come out of. His eyes refused to open, weighed down by what felt like all the tears he had yet to cry, his neck hurt to even turn his head, and his mind kept whispering to go back to sleep. But a stronger, more familiar voice was calling at him to wake up. The voice sounded terrified and hoarse, like it had been crying. But why would someone cry over him?

Merlin, he wanted that voice to go away! He just wanted to sleep!

Another voice joined the sob-er, this one much deeper. He knew this voice and he knew he had to follow his orders, he was his Captain after all.

His eyes fluttered open, immediately closing at the bright light, flinching back into his pillow.

"Com'on Harry, wake up!"

That voice again…it was Derrick!

He was able to crack his eyes open to make out the familiar form of his captain, "Der," his voice cracked, his throat like sandpaper.

"Go get Madam Pomfrey." Derrick demanded of the other voice…Hermione, his mind finally supplied as he heard her feet scramble away to follow his orders. "You idiot, merlin, I thought I'd lost you."

Harry cracked a smile; it wasn't often he got Derrick worried.

"Everyone's been worried. Emily and Nate almost stormed the Headmaster's office to get
information about you. I think it was Terry who delivered them, but they're from everyone in your dorm," he pointed to the side table which was overflowing with sweets and cards. Harry tried to turn his head but splitting pain erupted from his neck when he tried. His hand shot up as his leg muscles contracted. "Harry!? What's wrong?"

The covers fell off the bed in the twisting of limbs. It wasn't just his neck that hurt, his whole body felt like he had run a marathon.

Derrick was rudely shoved out of the way by a fretful Madam Pomfrey who was quick to force two separate potions down his friend's mouth.

Before Derrick could complain about her rough treatment, the Hospital Wing doors were banged open as a precession of people entered. Derrick grabbed Hermione as they moved out of the way. No way, the Minister of Magic was here?! His mouth hung open as he watched the Headmaster, the Minister of Magic, Head Auror Amelia Bones, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Flitwick surround the bed of the newly awoken second year.

"He's just woken up, Headmaster! I will not have my patient interrogated while he is unwell!"

Hermione's eyes widened at the healer daring to talk like that to so many important figures.

"My dear Madam Pomfrey, if there was another way but alas, we need to know what happened in the Chamber and Mr. Potter is the only one with these answers." Dumbledore stared at Harry who was beginning to process what the Headmaster had said.

Hands clenching the blanket in his lap, Harry asked without looking up, "Do the Weasleys know?"

His mind supplied him with the reason why he was in the Hospital Wing and what exactly had happened in the Chamber.

"The Weasleys have been informed and their remaining children have been pulled out of school to mourn." Minister Fudge supplied rather unkindly. His whole posture was tense as he took in Harry.

"Harry, we need to know what happened down in the chamber." Dumbledore interjected, cutting the minister off without appearing rude.

"Mr. Potter, my name is Amelia Bones. I am head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I need you to tell me how Ginevra Weasley was killed and who was behind these attacks. The Ministry has launched an investigation and you are our only witness." Madam Bones was a fearsome witch. Harry could see she was powerful in the way she carried herself. This must with the aunt Susan was talking about all those months ago. "I understand this is difficult for you, but we need to ask these questions." She finished with a sympathetic smile.

Harry refused to look at them. He didn't want their sympathy, their pity…he deserved to feel this pain. This bone deep agony that seemed to spread with every beat of his heart, a heart that shouldn't even be beating. Not when he had been poisoned by a basilisk.

"It was Tom," Dumbledore straightened at this, "He was in a diary me and Ginny used and that's why she died. Her life for his. I couldn't stop him, he was too powerful."

Dumbledore looked imploringly at Harry, who looked up at feeling the intense stare, "Tom? Tom Riddle?"

Of course he would know who the boy was right away. Harry nodded in confirmation, "Voldemort before he was Voldemort." Flinches went around when he spoke the Dark Lord's name.
"What nonsense is this Dumbledore!? You-Know-Who is gone!" Fudge exclaimed furiously.

"There was always a doubt, Minister. Voldemort dove further into the darkest of magic in search for immortality."

Harry didn't need Dumbledore to confirm what he already knew about Riddle. He was outmatched in power, skill, intelligence, and resources.

"There was a basilisk. Fawkes blinded it and I was able to kill it with the sword."

McGonagall looked on with pride as the gathered crowd turned their attention to said sword. Only a true Gryffindor could’ve pulled that from the Sorting Hat.

"I wasn't careful and a fang pierced my arm," Harry looked down at the wound on his arm. He had been mistaken in the chamber. The wound wasn't gone. He had an ugly scar a few centimeters in diameter.

"Ah yes, another extraordinary talent of Fawkes. I imagine his tears neutralized the poison in your body but sadly basilisk venom is riddled with dark magic which always leaves a trace." Dumbledore nodded to the scar, a permanent reminder of his second brush with death.

Bones studied his arm, making a note of it on her notepad. "And You-Know-Who left you to die, not knowing the phoenix could heal you?"

No, that wasn't the way Tom worked. Dumbledore knew the young Dark Lord loved to relish in his victim's suffering. He'd want to be there till the end, gloating of his victory. It was a weakness he never seemed to outgrow.

Harry felt his throat catch, those words coming back to haunt him, "You are mine, Harry Potter."

"You-Know-Who is dead! He was not down there! Clearly the boy is making it up; he's a parselmouth." Fudge bit out the last term like it was a curse word, soiling his mouth.

"You are not seriously implying that Mr. Potter is responsible for this? That he attacked these students and killed-!" McGonagall furiously berated the Minister, unable to believe the audacity of the man to accuse the traumatized boy.

"No Second Year has the power nor ability to do what has been done this year, I trust you know this Minister. I won't have you falsely accusing my student."

Seeing he was outnumbered, Fudge backed down, moving from the front of the group.

"He told me to survive right after he gave me this." Harry gripped the part of his neck he knew the mark was on.

Madam Bones gave it a curious look, "Can I-?" She indicated to his hand.

Harry hesitantly moved his hand away so she could study it. It looked like the Dark Mark but not exactly. You could tell that it was a different version, more unrefined. She scribbled it all down on her report. This was looking more and more troublesome. She didn't want to believe it either but the proof was sitting in front of her.

Only You-Know-Who could give out Dark Marks.

"If that is all Amelia," Dumbledore pulled the attention from Harry, "I would like to speak with
young Mr. Potter privately."

Madam Pomfrey moved to argue with Dumbledore, her patient needed rest, not to be interrogated!

"Oh and Professor McGonagall, can you please escort Miss Granger and Mr. Hopkins to the Great Hall?"

Derrick relaxed his hold on Hermione, both having been frozen in place hearing Harry's account of what happened in the chamber.

The Hospital Wing was in stark contrast to what it looked like all year. It was empty of all petrified students, the only resident being Harry. The sun was pouring in through the large glass windows, flooding the room in light. It was one of those rare sunny days Hogwarts saw. Harry knew if he reached out to the sunlight, his skin would soak up the warmth.

But he didn't feel warm and he didn't think he ever would again. The center of his chest felt like an iceberg had settled and refused to move.

"You've accumulated quite the assortment of sweets." Dumbledore's hand roamed through the sweets on his side table. "What you went through down there was a horrifying experience I wish I could've spared you from."

Harry looked to the Headmaster, turning his head just right so the streaming sunlight shone on his new scar, "I'm sorry Headmaster but I think I'd rather sleep right now."

Dumbledore let a small smile of understanding creep across his face, "I understand. But when you're released, I would like to speak to you. I trust you remember my password?"

Harry nodded, watching as the wizard left the infirmary.

It was quiet, almost too quite. The events from the chamber replaying themselves in his mind like a film. They were just as clear as when they'd happened. When he shut his eyes he could even feel the coldness of Ginny's skin when he touched her face. A cold sweat began to take over his body. He had to fight back the tears. He couldn't cry, not here. Sleep wasn't an option anymore. If he was haunted while awake, he knew he'd be haunted by nightmares.

Swinging his legs off the bed, Harry had to fight off a wave of dizziness. Regaining his bearings, he reached for the nearest card. It was from Luna. The funny drawings and get well made a small smile appear. He'd have to thank her before they left.

Before long, he was lost in all the get well messages from the school. There were the ones from his teammates and friends in Ravenclaw but there were also cards from students in Hufflepuff and Gryffindor. And for a moment, Harry wasn't haunted by his grief and terror.

An hour passed without him noticing, and soon another before Madam Pomfrey came with another set of potions for him to take. Like Dumbledore had said, she couldn't do anything about the scar from the basilisk but it had punctured part of his humerus so she was giving him Skele-grow, a potion he unfortunately was acquainted with earlier in the year.

She left him with strict instructions to not go overboard on his sweets as they would offset his other potion.

It was before dinner when Harry finally received visitors: the Ravenclaw Quidditch team. Harry welcomed them happily. Their concern was evident but they never asked him about what happened; Harry could only conclude that Derrick had spoken with them. Instead, Ryan and
Duncan excitedly told him that the professors had decided that the Quidditch match should still go on, wanting the students to have an enjoyable event in light of recent events. Emily happily supplied that they had to keep the difference between 210 points and they would win the Quidditch Cup. If not, Gryffindor would win it. It should be easy considering Harry had yet to miss the Snitch and there was no way Ryan would let in 21 goals.

"So that means you better be ready for next Saturday!" Roger quipped with a light hearted voice.

Everyone avoided the obvious elephant at that information: the Weasley Twins were on the Gryffindor team.

"Remember our agreement Harry. Quidditch Cup for a Quidditch match this summer." Derrick spoke up from his chair on the left side of Harry.

Harry had to think about what his captain was talking about. What did he mean…Ah, their agreement a few months back. He had forgotten about that.

"Hey! We were never promised that!" indignant shouts rang out from their teammates, "Preferential treatment! Stop playing favorites Hopkins!"

Emily gained a funny glint in her eyes as Harry saw her turn to Ryan. He watched in curiosity as she grabbed his attention, "If you play your best out there…I'll give you preferential treatment…and…show you exactly why you're my…fav-o-rite Keeper."

The boys broke out in raucous laughter, Samuels and Duncan falling out of their chairs from how hard they were laughing at Ryan's face which lit up bright red as his eyes widened. You could visibly see him swallow, his Adam's apple going up and down. Emily moved away with a victorious, full teeth smile as Ryan coughed and adjusted his legs.

Harry looked on in confusion, not knowing the two were a couple.

"Ryan likes Emily and she likes to take advantage of that sometimes." Derrick leaned over to whisper to Harry, "Secretly, Emily likes him too but she has way too much fun messing with him."

"If they both like each other, why aren't they dating?"

He knew there was chemistry between the two, they were constantly around each other even outside practice. If they liked each other, why didn't they say it?

"You'll understand when you start dating." It was Samuels who answered his question, having picked himself off the floor, laughter still shaking his body.

A kind Davies changed the subject so Ryan could regain his composure. "Did you schedule your tryout with the Pride of Portree yet?" His question was directed at Emily, one of the two seventh years trying out for the professional league.

"Hm? Yeah, it's the first Saturday in July. If it goes well, I'll be put on the reserves to train for the first year."

She had been disappointed when the Harpies hadn't offered her a place on either the reserve team or a tryout but was excited and willing to give her best for the Pride of Portree.

"We'll be cheering you on. Just don't forget about us lowly common people when you become a famous Quidditch star." Emily threw a chocolate frog at Duncan for his lip.
Laughter rang out around the bed and Harry was so thankful for his friends and knew he would miss Derrick, Emily, and Ryan next year. Thinking of Derrick, he had been unusually quiet. Turning to ask why, Harry caught him staring into space, looking lost in thought.

Breaking out of thought when he saw Harry turn to him, Derrick hesitated, unsure if now was the right time to ask but he wasn't sure when Harry would be released or they could talk again.

"Hey, I talked it over with my mum. We're going to France for two weeks after school and my tryout isn't until the middle of August so I was thinking you could stay with us for the rest of the summer. Mum really likes you and that way you don't have to worry about having somewhere to go and hiding your magic."

Harry bit his lip. Any other time he'd have said yes without thinking but now he hesitated. Voldemort was out there and no one would recognize him. He didn't want to bring the Hopkins into his mess.

"We have wards around the house, dad was a ward creator in the Ministry. You'll be safe there." Derrick saw the hesitancy in those green eyes and knew what he was thinking. Honestly, it was easy to read Harry Potter once you knew him and Derrick liked to think he knew his Seeker very well. He was there when Harry explained about You-Know-Who being back and claiming him. All the more reason for Harry not to return to the muggle world where he was unprotected.

"Mrs. Hopkins is literally the best! Me and Nate were over one summer and I don't think I've ever had so much fun. You been to the lake in the back? Enchanted a rope we did; had a bruised back for a week when I hit the water wrong."

"It'll be fun. I can take you to Diagon Alley and we can get you ready for next season. You'll need new gloves and I think a book on healing spells with how you play."

Harry knew he shouldn't but he really wanted to. He wanted to be in his world. He wanted to talk to people who understood him. He wanted to feel safe. Staying at the orphanage for the summer or wherever they placed him wasn't an option.

"Pick me up when you get back?" Harry really hoped he wasn't making a mistake.

They settled into a calm discussion about plans for the summer and the stress of their OWLs and NEWTs which start the following week. Dumbledore had announced the previous night that all other exams would be canceled. That left Derrick, Emily, Ryan, and Duncan to stress and cram for their exams.

The door opening caused a pause in the conversation. The seven students turned to see who had come: it was Hermione. She stood nervously in the doorway, clearly unsure if she should stay or not.

Emily made the first move, getting up to give the two friends time to talk. She gave Harry a hug, the rest following her lead but ruffling his hair or wishing him a good night. Soon it was only Hermione and Harry.

Hermione sat herself in the chair Derrick had vacated only moments before. There was a lot she wanted to say but sitting before him now, she couldn't find the right words. Starting off simple seemed easiest.

"I'm sorry about Ginny. I know she was your best friend."

"She was your friend too." That she was. While she hadn't been as close to the girl as Harry, they
had been friends. Waking up from months of being petrified only to be told of Ginny's death had really shaken her foundation and then to find out Harry was been taken and had been unconscious the last day had really broken her. She had cried all day.

"You found out it was a basilisk? How?"

Hermione blushed, she had been asked the same by the professors when they found the torn page in her hand, "It was rather easy once I connected the dots. A voice only you could hear, the roosters, and I saw spiders when Justin and Sir Nicholas were found. A basilisk as old as that would no doubt be very large so the only logically explanation would be it using the pipes to travel undetected."

Harry stared at her in disbelief, "How are you not in Ravenclaw?"

Hermione puffed out, she could be both smart and brave!

"You knew it was a basilisk as well. Professor McGonagall mentioned there was a shattered mirror with you bag."

"Yeah, me and Tom-," Harry cut himself off. He wasn't Tom. "I came to the same conclusion a few weeks after you were petrified."

Hermione grabbed Harry's fidgeting hand, clasping it in her slightly larger one. Strange how she was taller than him. Harry put it down to the Dursley's.

"He won't get away with it. Ginny won't have died in vain." She squeezed Harry's hand a little harder. She could feel his hand trembling in hers. She knew this had to be ten times harder for him.

His voice waived, right on the edge of crying, "She was so cold, Hermione. She was…was always warm and bright. I didn't notice earlier, how didn't I notice?!"

"Ginny was…-." She couldn't finish. How were they expected to be alright? Their friend was murdered only two days ago!

Hermione collapsed onto Harry, pulling him into her arms as he wrapped his arms around her, gut wrenching sobs raking his body as silent tears fell from Hermione's eyes.

/ 

Harry was released from the Hospital Wing the next morning with strict instructions to come back should he experience any kind of pain or dizziness. The halls were empty, students still in class despite not having exams.

Harry made his way to the Headmaster's office, Dumbledore's instructions clear from yesterday.

It wasn't a long walk but Harry felt something shift. He had always felt safe at Hogwarts, even with the attacks, but his eyes were now open that he wasn't untouchable. It was like realizing that your parents weren't these perfect, indestructible people. They were still your parents but that little childish spark had been diminished. It was the same for Harry; Hogwarts was his home but he didn't look at it like he did last year.

He had grown up and experienced so much this year that he felt he had aged a decade. He had survived two encounters with Voldemort, not many could claim that. Honestly, at this point, Harry would rather die the next time he encountered the Dark Lord because the people he cared about seemed to die in his place every time.
Footsteps echoed off the stone walls, filling the silent corridor. How were they expected to finish the school year when one of their own had been murdered? His question answered from all those weeks ago: he felt dead on the inside…that was how it would feel to lose someone he cared for.

How was Dumbledore ever going to make them feel safe in these castle walls again? Why wasn't Dumbledore there, Harry wanted to scream. He wanted to scream until his voice was raw. He wanted to blame the professors, wanted to blame the students, wanted to blame Voldemort. But he knew he couldn't. The blame rested on him. He had opened up and kept Tom's secret. He hadn't noticed Ginny's odd behavior. He hadn't been strong enough to stop Tom. He put his trust in the wrong people.

Licorice wand was the password. Why? Harry didn't know and frankly, didn't care.

Dumbledore softly called for him to enter.

The office was exactly how he remembered it. It made him even angrier. Everything had changed yet nothing had.

"Harry," Dumbledore greeted him warmly. "Lemon drop?"

Harry declined.

Dumbledore took in his appearance. His normally unruly hair was even more unruly. His skin was a shade paler than before. Dark shadows were starting to form under his eyes. But it was his eyes that had changed the most. He not only shared his mother's eyes, he also had her habit of her eyes reflecting her emotions and right now he could see anger simmering in those emerald orbs.

"Have a seat. I would like you to tell me how you came to know Tom Riddle." It wasn't a question, Harry heard that much.

Harry took a seat, hand running across the back of the smooth wood before being placed in his lap, "He hated you, you know. He always told me to be careful around you. I thought he just didn't like you but it makes sense now, knowing who he turned into."

Albus hummed in agreement. Tom Riddle and he had never seen eye to eye.

"He was a brilliant student. Probably one of the most brilliant to ever walk these halls. He charmed not only the students but the staff. He led this school not only academically but in service as well. He had a way about him that drew people in. If I hadn't saw the real Tom Riddle, I regret to say, I too would've been fooled by him."

Harry didn't need to hear all this. He knew it, had experienced it firsthand! Was he being patronized?

"I don't think any little of you Harry. More powerful and experienced men than you have been hoodwinked by him." Dumbledore moved his arms so his elbows were leaning on his desk, head resting on his hands. "I had my doubts that Voldemort was truly gone. My thoughts were confirmed last year when he tried to steal the Philosopher's Stone I had hidden in the school."

What? He read Harry's expression.

"Yes, it seems Professor Quirrell became the unlikely host to Lord Voldemort last year. He was possessing the man but left him to die when I realized my error." Harry stared at him, dumbfounded, anger momentarily forgotten. "Lord Voldemort has clung to life against all odds. Knowing how you interacted with him will help me in my search for how."
He knew Voldemort was out there all this time, the man who killed his parents and probably wanted revenge, and he never thought Harry should know this?!

So he takes out one of the strongest Dark Lords of the century and he's just shipped off to his aunts' in the muggle world and then dumped in a muggle orphanage a few years later. Who even put him with his aunt? Did they not think to check on him? See how he was being treated? If he was even alive?!

Was that why his scar hurt last year whenever he was near Quirrell? It was telling him Voldemort was near? How did a curse scar even work like that?

"Harry?"

Harry broke out of his thoughts.

"He said he preserved his sixteen year-old memory in a diary," was his curt reply. He didn't want to be here anymore. Tom was right, Dumbledore didn't care for him or his safety.

Dumbledore let that information sink in. So it hadn't been an adult Tom Riddle that Harry had been interacting with. It had been Tom while he was still at Hogwarts. That explains how he had been able to woo both Ginny and Harry.

"Do you have this diary?"

Yes, he still had the diary because that was his first priority, Harry though sarcastically. Sorry, he had been too busy trying not to die and making sure he got Ginny out of there.

"No, Professor. Maybe if you had come yourself and not just sent Fawkes, we wouldn't be having this conversation!" Harry's voice rose at his accusation. Numerous portraits protested such disrespect. "Why didn't you come sooner, why didn't you save us?!"

Harry looked at Dumbledore, begging him, pleading for an answer. "Why didn't you save Ginny?" his voice, half cracking at the signs of puberty, pled brokenly.

"Even I make mistakes, Harry. Ginny's death was not your fault. Tom Riddle is the one who killed her. You don't need to carry that burden."

"You're wrong. I killed her. I didn't stop him. She trusted me and I failed her. I deserve to feel this pain forever. I should've died, not her!" The funny objects on his desk were thrown to the floor in frustration.

Dumbledore showed no reaction, his demeanor as calm as when Harry first entered. "You are not the first nor will you be the last to be fooled by Tom Riddle."

He was wrong. He wasn't just fooled by the memory. He had been thoroughly defeated in every sense of the word. How did he not see that?

"He branded me! I'll never be free!" he cried out. The mark on his neck was the constant reminder of his failures, of his defeat. The books stacked on the floor were the next to go.

Dumbledore never moved an inch, just calmly observing the distraught twelve year old. The previous headmasters and headmistresses weren't so calm about the destruction of the office.

"You'll grow from this. You just need to believe in yourself. "
"I feel him, like he's suffocating me. Like he's always watching me. He's won; can't you see that!? He's already won." Harry's hand moved in front of his chest, clenching inwards.

"He's only won when you stop fighting, when you no longer believe in yourself. You hold something Voldemort could never hope to have. You love Harry and you have people who love you. Yes, while you do share many similarities, what matters is how you are different. Voldemort would never feel the pain and sorrow you feel over Ginny's death."

"How can I ever win against him? That was Voldemort at 16! He's leagues beyond what I could ever hope to be."

"He taught you while you had the diary. Even he saw something in you, something powerful. If there is one thing Tom has always valued above all else, it is power. For him to teach you, his enemy, he saw potential."

Harry wished he hadn't, wished the diary had never come into his possession.

"There will come a time when we have to choose between what is right and what is easy. Your path will only get harder from here on out." Dumbledore finally moved from behind his desk, walking over to Fawkes' perch. "Help will always be given to those at Hogwarts who ask for it, I hope you remember that Harry. You don't have to take this on your own."

The office was in shambles but it was quiet. The quiet that always followed after a meltdown. A quiet everyone dreads breaking.

Harry pondered his next question carefully, the need to know almost suffocating with the information that had already been revealed.

"Why can I speak parseltongue? Neither of my parents could."

Dumbledore took in a breath, bringing his hands down so he could study Harry better. This was a question he had been hoping to avoid for some years.

"It is my belief that when he attacked you that night, part of his power latched on to you –."

"Magic can't do that. I've read all about parseltongue. It's inherited."

Harry was proving himself to be a true Ravenclaw. "I have speculated for years that he was tampering in soul magic – the diary is confirmation – and part of his soul latched onto you. This is where you get your ability to speak to snakes. I image a few other unwanted side effects as well."

Harry felt dirty. Like he wanted to vomit.

"I have seen into your soul, Harry Potter. And it is mine."

Did he know? Is that why he let him live.

Merlin, there was a piece of that monster inside him!

"How do I get it out? Why haven't you taken it out?" He wanted it out now!

Dumbledore looked at him sadly. "There is no way to get it out of you. There has never been a case where two souls inhabit the same, living body."

The door banged open unexpectedly, surprising Harry but Albus didn't seem startled by their unexpected guest.
"So you have returned." Harry could guess right away who this was: Lucius Malfoy, Draco's father.

"When it was heard Arthur Weasley's daughter was taken, the Governors saw fit to reinstate me. The Minister and Madam Bones requested an inquiry after the sad conclusion."

A small head peaked out from behind Malfoy, a very familiar head: Dobby?

"And?" the elder Malfoy implored rudely, "The culprit was caught?"

Harry observed the two and saw how Dumbledore observed the man in front of him very carefully. Did he –?

Wait, Dobby's master was Malfoy. Dobby knew about the attacks that were going to happen. How could he know that unless he knew who was going to start it?

Malfoy Sr. had given the book to Ginny; he was the cause of all of this.

"We have identified the culprit. I trust you consider your next moves very carefully Lucius. If it were ever discovered that you helped facilitate the murder of Ginny Weasley, losing your position on the Board of Governors will be the least of your concerns."

A grimace flashed across the blonde's face.

"Is that a threat?"

Dumbledore leveled a look at him, unfazed by the hostility given off by the man, "Merely a word of advice."

"If that's all." The pureblood shoved Dobby forward as he left, the door shutting gently, no matter how hard Malfoy tried to slam it.

Harry watched the pureblood leave with narrowed eyes, mouth hanging open at the events that unfolded.

"Sir, you're just going to let him go?! He's the cause of all this!"

"You know that, I know that, and he knows that. But we have no proof that he did indeed give Lord Voldemort's diary to Ginny."

"But but Dobby's the one that warned me about this happening. Can't he testify or something?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry struggling to come to terms with this unfortunate turn of events.

"The word of a House Elf holds little weight in law. Sadly, even if it did, Mr. Malfoy is the owner of Dobby."

"So he's just going to get away with it?!!"

"There is something you can do." He moved his hand slightly to a book on the edge of his desk, one of the only ones to have survived Harry's temper.

Did the Headmaster finally lose his mind? How was a Quidditch book going to help him?

"Perhaps you should ask Professor Flitwick for a new tie, yours looks ripped." Dumbledore gave him a knowing smile, tilting his head forward a bit.
Ahh, Harry understood. He shared a smile with the old man as he collected the book and tugged his tie off.

Blue eyes followed the boy as he sprinted down the stairs, wondering if he made the right choice.

"Mr. Malfoy!" Harry finally caught up to the aristocrat. He shoved the Quidditch book into Malfoy's hands roughly. "Maybe your son can learn something from it since it seems money can't buy everything."

Harry did his best impersonation of Snape, his sneer and general condescending attitude.

His response was a returned sneer. He wasn't going to get off that easily.

"I don't care if it takes my entire life, I'll make sure you pay for her death." Harry stepped closer, "I'll make sure everyone knows how much of a coward you are, manipulating an eleven year old girl, killing her. When people think of you, you'll be worse than a Mudblood."

The book was slammed into Dobby's unsuspecting hands as Malfoy whipped his wand from his cane, advancing what little distance remained between the two.

"You think you, a filthy half-blood, can threaten me!?"

Harry stood his ground, a smirk taking over his face as his gaze was not on the advancing man but his servant behind him. Dobby read Harry's look and opened the book, out dropping his Ravenclaw tie.

"You're reputation is already ruined. Tricked by a twelve year old. Really, what did Voldemort ever see in you?"

Malfoy roared in fury, his wand raised, the forbidden curse on the tip of his tongue.

"You shall not harm Harry Potter!"

In a second, the once master was blasted across the corridor, landing in a heap.

Harry turned to Dobby, smile genuine, "I think we're even now."

Dobby's smile took over his face as he realized what exactly had happened.

"Dobby is free! Great Harry Potter freed lowly Dobby..."

Harry gained satisfaction watching the older Malfoy try to stand up gracefully. He failed as his hair had fallen out of its neat tie and his clothes wrinkled.

He deserved every piece of this. Harry only wished that there were more witnesses to see the fall of the House of Malfoy. To see the pieces of slime they really were. That money couldn't protect them forever. Not against someone who didn't care about things like that.

The older man glared at the two, knowing he couldn't do anything anymore.

"Soon, you'll meet the same end as your parents. But you won't have the fortune of a quick death."

Dobby moved so that Harry was behind him, his arm raised in warning, "You shall not harm Harry Potter!"
He knew he made an enemy that day, a very powerful enemy.
Two days ago:

Tom walked out of the Chamber, taking in the fresh air for the first time. It was good to be alive. Twirling Ginny’s wand in his hand, he made his way to Hogsmeade. There were a few things he needed before he left Scotland.

He scoffed in disgust as he took in the overgrown trail, exiting to the back road of Hogsmeade. In over fifty years, nothing had changed. The buildings looked exactly as they had when he attended school. Some of the business had changed but overall, the small village had remained almost frozen in time.

Ah, what perfect timing.

Tom spotted a head of shiny blond hair that was easily recognizable from Harry’s descriptions. He knew this man, oh, did he know all about this man. And he was itching to teach him a lesson. No one touched what was his. No one got away being a pathetic excuse of a wizard like Lockhart. He despised those who took credit for other’s accomplishments. He was worse than a mudblood.

Putting on his most charming smile, Tom hunted his prey.

“Professor Lockhart!”

The title alone made him want to vomit but it did its job. The foolish man turned around, half frazzled, suitcase falling from his shaky arms.

“Yes, yes?” Lockhart’s eyes darted back and forth, looking for the source of the voice.

Tom walked further into the light, Lockhart visibly relaxing when he saw that it was only a student. That was his second mistake. The man didn’t even realize Tom wasn’t his student.

Their eyes met and Tom held nothing back as he tore through the man’s mind. He effortlessly pushed away all attempts to bloke him. The man was actually moderately proficient in occlumency but Tom had mastered legilimency years ago. He pulled through all the details of how the man oblivated the real witches and wizards who accomplished those feats in his books. Like he thought. A wizard who couldn’t even duel properly held no chance of accomplishing all those feats. As of that moment, he felt nothing but satisfaction at the pain the man was in. That changed when he pulled up a memory of Harry, more specifically, the memory of the Quidditch match.

Tom watched it play out, analyzing everything as it happened, taking note of those surrounding Harry and putting faces to names. He froze when he saw both expressions. Harry’s terrified, pain-filled face trying to keep the incompetent man away. His blood boiled at someone evoking such emotions from what was his. But when he looked at Lockhart, he saw something different. He had studied facial cues since he was little, it was the only way to survive the orphanage and later
Slytherin. So he knew that this was no accident on Lockhart’s part. He had done this spell on purpose. He saw rage and jealousy flash in those eyes before he plastered on a bright, fake smile.

Tom pulled out, making sure the man had some sense left with him. He wanted him to be aware of what was about to happen and why.

Lockhart fell into a pathetic heap, tears streaming from his face and he tried to scrabble away.

Wanting to prolong this as long as possible, Tom took measured steps, the added time increasing the man’s panic and desperation.

“Please! Please!” he begged, “I’ll do anything.”

Tiring of his obnoxious voice, Tom struck out his hand, gripping the smooth face in his long fingers, silencing the man instantly.

“Good boy. Now, do you know why you’re here? No? You touched what is mine. You hurt what is mine. Harry Potter belongs to Lord Voldemort.” Oh, did he enjoy the fear that entered the man’s eyes. The certainty of his death now assured. Tom tapped his cheek, in this instance, death was too good for this man. “I was going to obliterate you, a poetic irony I do so love, but your actions must be punished first.”

Whimpering escaped the man’s pursed lips as tears continued to stream down his face.

“Crucio.” The curse left his lips like it was any other spell and not the torture curse. He didn’t blink as the man at his feet flailed and screamed. This was his rightful place, he only wished Harry was here to see what he was willing to do for him. To see that he had no reason to fear Tom. Despite enjoying the screams, Lockhart was making too much noise. Silencing the man, he cast his next spell, taking every memory from the man until he was left with nothing but the emotions rushing through his body.

The man curled into a ball, shivering and twitching as he struggled to piece together what was happening.

Let him be an example of Lord Voldemort’s wrath.

He was riding on a high that nothing could knock him down from. He would succeed where his other self had failed.

Now, he had a ring to collect.

//

Present:

Despite the best efforts of the staff, news of Lockhart reached the students and soon rumours began to spread about who did it and why. The most common was that whoever the Heir of Slytherin was must’ve gotten to him when they left the school. And didn’t that just create more confusion as no one was missing. Everyone was accounted for which meant the mystery of the heir was still unsolved.

Dumbledore tried to keep the news from Harry as he knew the boy would recognize it for what it was: a message from Tom. But there was only so much he could protect him from.

Hermione was the first to break the news when he was released from the Hospital Wing and was to
attend regular classes. DADA became a free period with no professor to teach. Like Dumbledore feared, Harry knew exactly what the attack meant when he was shown the newspaper. The cruelty of the attack, the timing of it…it made him think of all the horrible things he had told Tom – no! Riddle – of the man and that this was some twisted revenge for him. Just another person to add to his list. First his parents, then Ginny, now Lockhart. While he didn’t like the man, he wouldn’t wish this upon anyone. Though a dark, twisted part of his mind whispered to him that the man deserved this because of what he did to him. It was a part of himself that had gained noise since he awoke in the Hospital Wing a couple days ago. It was the voice that also still thought of Riddle as Tom, his friend and not his enemy. It was a voice he smashed into the deepest void he could.

Hermione noticed that there was something different about her friend and for the first time she was at a loss on what to do. She had heard from other students how different he had been since she was petrified, the prolonged absences, the fights, the personality change.

Honestly, she didn’t care what these people thought. These were the same people who until two days ago, believed Harry to be the one attacking the school and now here they were, acting worried about him. They didn’t even know him!

But she could tell something was wrong and she wanted to help. She knew it wasn’t about Ginny because they have talked about it the last few days. This is something else, something he doesn’t want her to know about. She noticed it started around the time he read the news about Lockhart. Was he worried about Riddle going after him? All evidence pointed to the contrary. If Riddle wanted to hurt Harry, he would’ve killed him in the Chamber, not let him go.

…there was that mark that no one knows the function of.

She hadn’t seen it herself, Madam Pomfrey having bandaged it and Harry having kept the bandages on. The mark had to mean something, though, if Riddle took the time to brand Harry with it. Was it just a statement or did it have a functionality? If so, was that what was bothering Harry?

She decided to test out her hypothesis in Transfiguration.

“I had a free period today. I went up to the library to revise my notes for Defense. I know we aren’t having end of term exams but I don’t want to fall behind for next year. Who do you imagine our new professor will be?” Hermione questioned Harry when they had finished their assignment. Like usual, they were the first two finished, Hermione having gotten the spell work down after a few tries despite being petrified for the last few months.

There it was.

At the mention of Defense, she saw the minute flinch and the aborted arm movement.

Harry turned to pack his bag, keeping his head down as he mumbled his reply, “I don’t care just as long as they can last longer than a year.”

Harry wished that he could be excused from the rest of his classes. Ever since his confrontation with Lucius Malfoy, everything had seemed to go downhill. He’d gone back to the Hospital Wing to get something for the pain that had seemed to explode from his body and ended up spending the rest of that afternoon sleeping up there. Hermione had found him took him to dinner which was the first time the entire school had seen him since the incident.

A hush had fallen over the Great Hall as all eyes had turned to him as he made his way to his normal seat with his year mates. He’d barely stopped himself from grabbing at his neck, suddenly self-conscious that everyone could see what it was, see his failure. Hermione had taken his hand in
her firm grip when she noticed and marched with her head held high to the Ravenclaw table with him. Padma, Michael, and Terry had shared small smiles that Hermione returned for him. Normal conversation did not resume, unfortunately.

It ended up being too much and Harry excused himself, leaving with the entirety of the hall’s attention on him. He’d yet to return to his dorm, spending the last two nights in the Hospital Wing. He didn’t want to deal with the stares and the inevitable questions. What right did they have to ask him about what happened? What right did they have to act like they cared? He was nothing but a freak show to them.

He’d been unable to get the news article about Lockhart out of his mind since he read it. The reporter was very thorough in their description of Lockhart’s state, even having a picture of the man at the scene and at St. Mungo’s.

...evidence of the Cruciatus Curse...

A professor at Hogwarts...recent attacks...death of student...

...Oblivated of all memories...evidence has come forward to suggest Gilderoy Lockhart was a fraud!

School to remain open despite public outcry...Headmaster remains under investigation...

Boy Who Lived found safe to the relief of the public...

...found safe...

...safe...

Harry gripped his pant leg as anger coursed through him.

Safe? What did they know about safe? He has never been and will never be safe! No one around him is.

“Potter!” Harry looked to the stern professor who had called for his attention. Her look softened as she caught his eyes, “You may leave.”

Seeing the gift, he collected his belongs and bolted out of the door trying to figure out where he wanted to go. Everywhere seemed tainted now with either the memory of Ginny or Tom – no, it was Riddle!

He started off in a random direction, just needing to do something when an open window caught his attention. It was the perfect day with few clouds, a slight breeze, and unusually warm weather. It was, it was perfect flying weather. And that was something he hadn’t done in what felt like months. There was a game coming up, the last game of the season: Ravenclaw vs Gryffindor. Suddenly, flying seemed like the best idea. Being up in the air, away from everything.

It was two hours later that the rest of his team joined him and for the first time since he woke up, he felt like he could pretend like things were normal. Emily and Ryan flirting obnoxiously, Derrick barking out orders to Duncan and Samuels to pay attention to the bludgers, and Roger taking in everything.

He would miss this, Harry thought as he ignored the Snitch for a moment. Next year, almost half the team would be gone. They would bring in new people, people that weren’t Derrick, Ryan, and
Emily. They had limited practices left and Harry didn’t want this to end. He didn’t want them to go. Not out into the world where Riddle walked. Not where they could be in danger just for knowing him.

The Prophet ran articles on the Chamber and the death of Ginny Weasley for weeks. The investigations were supposed to be confidential to give the family time to grieve and allow Madam Bones time to conduct an investigation but Fudge had seen a need to hold a press conference about the event despite all objections and reveal the loss of the girl while assuring the public that Hogwarts was now safe.

Harry crumbled the papers when he saw these, rage manifesting that was so easily brought to the surface these days. Hermione knew how to distract him though as she began to rant about all the laws the Minister has violated and that the Weasley family had already been through enough.

He would flinch at the reminder. All the Weasley’s had been pulled from school after Ginny’s death. He figured it was to mourn but secretly, Harry wondered if it was to keep them safe. He’d never much interacted with the other members outside of the twins’ pranks but he knew he would never be able to look any of them in the eye. He had gotten their sister killed; they had every right to hate him.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t burn the paper that held Ginny’s obituary. The portrait of her smiling with her family, winking up at him…almost like she was still with him. He just couldn’t destroy it. Instead, he kept it hidden away in his trunk, out of sight but not out of mind.

Hermione probably knew but for once didn’t lecture him only unhealthy coping mechanisms. They were both hurting but Hermione hadn’t seen Ginny die, hadn’t been helpless to do anything as the boy he had trusted without a doubt had turned out to be the very person he should fear. She didn’t have the mark of his failure branded on her skin. The constant burning pain that coursed through his nerves, the flinch it inflicted every time he thought of it. And he couldn’t tell her how he really felt because he mourned for the friend he had trusted in Tom. Tom had been so much to him that it was still hard to reconcile the friend he had made with the man who had done such terrible things. He couldn’t decide who he hated more: Tom or himself? Who was he kidding? He hated himself because he knew he couldn’t fully hate Tom, not after all they had shared, because he was to blame for Ginny’s death. Everything that happened was his fault and that was why he couldn’t hate Tom, because it was ultimately his fault.

It was midnight, another restless night. Crawling from his bedsheets, Harry entered and locked the washroom. Turning the showers on the highest settings, he let the steam fill up the tiled room. It did little to calm his mind as he worked on removing the bandages around his arm and neck. They were two weeks old by now and needed changed. He had put if off for as long as possible but he could feel them begin to itch and the last thing he wanted was an infection. Taking a look at his arm, it was only slightly inflamed but was healing nicely. Dropping the used wrapping to the wet floor, he made his way cautiously to the mirrors. He hadn’t seen it yet, refused when Madam Pomfrey asked.

Leaning in closer since he didn’t have his glasses on, Harry could clearly see the mark, the snake coiling and uncoiling almost in agitation around a crest with an S at the center.

Oh god! He felt like he was going to be sick!

Tears welled up as his hand rose, nails digging into tender flesh, trying desperately to claw it off. All it seemed to do was agitate the snake further as it began to hiss at him.
He didn’t want this!

This is what you’ve always wanted.

A gasp escaped his lips, looking around franticly, heart pounding as his mind went blank at the thought of Riddle returning for him.

But no one was there. All five of the shower stalls were empty, nothing but burning water spraying out. The blue and bronze of the tiling doing little to comfort him.

You’ve only tasted a portion of the power you could wield!

His head snapped to his reflection. The voice wasn’t coming from around him, it was coming from inside him, inside his mind.

And all at once, everything shifted. Somehow he felt cold, so cold in a room full of steam. He could see his chest rise and fall rapidly as he struggled to quiet his thoughts but nothing worked.

He hated his reflection. Hated the face that stared back at him. Hated those eyes that everyone claimed were his mother’s. Hated the scar. Hated the mark.

This was the boy who couldn’t save his friend! This was the boy who should’ve died beneath the school!

‘smash’

The pain inside partially diminished, replaced with the physical consequences of his actions. He watched, feeling like an outsider, as his blood dripped down the mirror, the broken shards falling into the sink and onto the floor.

He was wrong, the pain didn’t go away!

He couldn’t –!

There wasn’t –!

A sob escaped his chapped lips as he brought his wounded hand to his chest, not caring of the blood getting everywhere. They continued to rack his body as he dropped to the tile, water soaking into his pajama pants. He felt the glass shards under his leg and pulled one out with his good hand, staring at it with defeated eyes.

It would only take one. One cut and all this could be over.

It seemed like such an innocent little thing. Barely three centimeters across but this little shard could be so much more if he let it. All he had to do…

His hand shook violently as he brought it to his bloody wrist.

One cut, that’s all he needed. And he didn’t even have to look.

Harry closed his eyes and put pressure on his skin, letting out a choked sob. His face remained frozen for a moment but it felt like an eternity as he finally gave up and threw the shade across the washroom, letting out a cry of frustration.

He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t do something so easy, that would solve all his problems!
Why? Why was he so pathetic?!

He wrapped his arms around his knees, burying his face in the space created and let every emotion he was feeling wash over him as he finally released everything that had been building up the last fortnight. With barely any visibility from the steam, hair clinging to his face, and his pants turning red, Harry cried himself into exhaustion.

Left with only stuttering inhalations that rake the body after a hard cry, Harry moved mechanically to the showers to wash away the evidence of his episode. He noted absentmindedly that there was no glass in his hand.

Shutting off all the shower heads, he collected his soiled clothes and exited the washroom. Pulling out clean clothes and the extra bandages Madam Pomfrey had given him, Harry got dressed and worked on wrapping his arm and neck once again. Once done, he wrapped himself in his sheets and fell into a dreamless sleep.

//

He didn’t talk about what happened that night and all evidence was hidden or taken care of. No one needed to know.

Instead, his mind was occupied with the upcoming Quidditch game which arrived faster than everyone was expecting. He was thankful for the distraction.

The Weasley Twins returned for this final game, demanding to play as that was what Ginny would’ve wanted, what she had been looking forward to the most: Harry vs her brothers.

It was in honour of her that they all left everything on the pitch. It was the best game the school had seen in decades. The Gryffindor team had stepped up beyond belief, each member playing their best game. Wood hardly let any shot in and the Chasers were almost flawless. The game was one of the longest in recent memory, at over three hours, as each team gave it their all. There were playing more than a game, this was for everything that had happened and what they had lost this year.

Harry had only seen the Snitch a few times before it had disappeared, the Gryffindor Seeker trailing after him.

In the end, Ravenclaw would’ve won the Cup by ten points as Harry had gone after the Snitch when they were only a hundred points down but Angelica Johnson scored right before his hand wrapped around the golden ball. The end score was 300-210, Gryffindor’s victory. But the final results were tied at 700 points each.

The Quidditch Cup was a tie; it was the first time in the history of the school of such a thing happening.

Gryffindor had won the House Cup and they split the Quidditch Cup with Ravenclaw.

It was best way the year could’ve ended, given everything that had happened. Harry got the Cup for Derrick and the Weasley’s got to celebrate the Cup for their sister. Wood and Derrick were both ecstatic and lifted the trophy together, in a show of house unity.

The party that took place afterwards was wild. Harry found himself on the shoulders of Derrick and Ryan and then Derrick and Nate when Emily kidnapped her official boyfriend to snog him senseless. Drinks and music and laughter filled the tower as the party raged into the wee hours of the morning where Harry woke up under Terry and Michael in a pile in front of the fireplace.
Looking around, he saw Emily and Ryan tucked aware in a corner, Derrick and Laura looked to have made up as they were snuggled together on the couch closest to the second years. Padma and Anthony each had their own chair. And his eyes landed on the last of his people, slighting widening before letting out a small laugh. It was Nate and he was the smaller spoon to Wood’s (yes, that Wood) larger spoon. He hadn’t seen the Gryffindor come during the party so he must’ve been asleep already. They looked good together.

For the first time in weeks, everyone looked free.

//

In the final days of the school year, Dumbledore was forced to call Harry into his office.

With the death of the Basilisk and Tom out of Hogwarts, Dumbledore knew the safest place for Harry was at Hogwarts and worked on getting the necessary paperwork filled out. But he learned that Lucius had filed a motion to prevent students from staying at the school over the summer holidays even though it had been done in the past for certain circumstances. Even though he lost his position on the School Board, Lucius still held sway in the Ministry and was able to get Fudge to pass through the ordinance.

Lucius had been removed from the Board when his threats to the others members and a student were made public by an anonymous source. Harry had kept his promise, he wasn’t going to let Malfoy get away with this. It was easy to have Dumbledore get those on the Board to come forward, especially when the headmaster was made aware of the extent of Malfoy’s threat to Harry.

Dumbledore had to inform Harry that he couldn’t stay over the summer. He felt like he was feeding him to the wolves, sending him into the Muggle World unprotected. He no longer had the protection of his mother and now he had no place to stay. He was going to be rehomed later in the summer, before Mr. Hopkins returned. This put him in danger because Tom was cunning, he could see the teenager’s fingerprints all over that ordinance. He wanted Harry where he could easily get to him but if he was going through all of that, why leave him in the Chamber? Why not take him with him?

Dumbledore never could fully understand Tom’s mind.

He called together a few people from the old crowd to get eyes out. His best option was a man he hadn’t spoken to in over a decade, one who he had failed. But maybe he could atone for those sins and help Harry.

Remus Lupin’s strengths had always leaned more to education and teaching, he had a great affinity for it. With the unfortunate circumstances Lockhart found himself in, Hogwarts was in need of a new DADA professor.

//

The Leaving Feast was a somber affair as Dumbledore reflected on all they have lost and what awaits them. He doesn’t outright say who was behind the events but that they all must be cautious and watch out for one another. Ginny’s memorial was also held this day as all the banners turned black in remembrance.

Hermione clutched Harry’s hand tightly both with stoic expressions, forgoing seating with her house in favor of supporting her best friend.
His thoughts are a million miles away, revisiting his conversation with the Headmaster a few days ago when he was told of the newly passed ordinance preventing him from remaining at the school. He had taken the news surprisingly well as there were no broken trinkets or books thrown around this time. To be honest, nothings really phased him much now, almost like he was numb to the world.

Harry and Hermione board the Hogwarts Express, Hermione trying to reassure a quiet Harry that he would be okay, that the Ministry allows magic outside of school for self-defense. She wished she could take Harry with her family to France but he didn't want to put them in danger. They were Muggles and couldn’t protect themselves. He would just have to hang in there until Derrick could pick him up.

They are silent in the compartment on the train ride to Kings Cross.

She leaves him hesitantly when she sees her parents, Harry waved her on, promising that he would be fine. But he said it in the voice that she had come to identify as his assuredly, ‘not fine’ voice, the one he used when he tried to convince her that he was okay. But she couldn’t do much this time. They were going their separate ways this summer. She worried letters wouldn’t be enough.

Derrick made his way over with his mum. Mrs. Hopkins gave him the date and time Derrick would pick him up. She surprised him by pulling him into a hug and placing a kiss on the top of his head. Harry blushed, realizing that was the first time he had received a mother’s hug or kiss.

“Now you be thinking about what match you want to see. I got a promise to keep!” Derrick messes with his hair, staring down at the kid he had come to care for greatly this past year. He worried about him.

Harry offers up a smile, looking forward to it if only to distract his mind from his nightmares of Ginny and Riddle. He even found himself looking for her in the mass of people. Spotting the somber group of red-heads making their way to the exit. They had stayed for the memorial and had boarded the train. He caught brown eyes and Ron shared a weak smile with him and a half wave. He managed his own.

Outside in the hot summer air of London, Harry breathed in the familiar sent of pollution and thought sardonically that he was home. London was his home, the city he could never escape it seemed.

Hailing a cab, he made it back to the orphanage by twenty minutes later, afternoon traffic causing a few backups.

He just wanted to collapse onto his bed and never wake up. He deposited his trunk at the foot of his bed and fell face first onto his mattress. The linen was clean, Dot must’ve done up his bed recently was his final thought before allowing himself to fall asleep, the weight of the day taking its toll.

//

A hesitant knock sounded at his door, making his gasping breath pause as terrified eyes turned to the source, blinking awake from his nightmare.

It was only Dot. She looked at him worriedly, eyes pulled together as she debated if she should comfort him.

"Who's Ginny?" she questions softly, moving into his sparse room. He hadn't taken the time to
unpack when he got back.

Harry pushed his glasses onto his face, wiping the sweat that had gathered at the same time.

"It's okay sweetie, you're gonna be okay." Dot was someone Harry would miss. She loved and cared for every child that came through those doors, regardless of their background. She had a way of making the most hardened orphans drop their masks and feel like a child again. She carded her hands through his messy hair, pulling him into her bosom, rocking him back and forth as he choked back tears.

He didn't want to talk about it anymore. He didn't want to cry about it anymore.

"Sssshhhh Sssshhhh," she hushed, knowing that boys his age didn't want adults to see their emotions, especially them crying. "Everything's gonna be alright."

If only she knew what had happened, she would know that nothing would be alright ever again.

Her hand touched the bandage at his neck, pausing in her soothing, "Do you want help with this?"

Harry pulled away, wiping his eyes as discretely as possible, and shook his head. She was under the impression that there had been an attack at his school and he had been injured and the wrapping on his neck was covering his injuries.

He didn't want her to see the mark, for questions he couldn't answer to be raised. He knew how to avoid social service calls. If they for one moment thought that he wasn't safe at Hogwarts, inquiries would be made and he would be forced to attend another school. He didn't want that kind of trouble because he knew the Ministry would have to get involved.

So he kept it to himself, promising her he would be down later for supper.

Dot was hesitant to leave but gave him a parting kiss on the forehead.

Left in the shadows of the small room, he felt the sobs bubble up in his chest again, choking him as he tried to hold them back. A stray tear ran down his face and a damn broke. Face shoved into the pillow, he allowed the sobs to rack his body once more time, the force of them a physical pain in his chest now as he felt his pillow drench in his tears.

He never made it down for supper. Exhaustion taking over his body as he dry-sobbed himself into sleep, dreams just as restless as reality.

//

At only three weeks since the initial article was released about Ginny’s death with the Weasley Family portrait, Sirius Black escaped Azkaban. He’d gotten a hold of the newspaper from one of the guards and determination filled him when he read about Harry’s attack and saw the picture of Wormtail in the Weasley picture. His addled brain began to connect the pieces. If Harry was attacked and this girl whose family Wormtail was hiding out with, died, he must be responsible somehow. Which meant Harry wasn’t safe. By the second week of July, Padfoot was making his way to Surrey, the only reasonable place Harry would be.

Sirius was in for a surprise when he eventually made it to Surrey and discovered no Harry. Not seeing any sign of his godson after a two days, he stormed the Dursley’s house when Petunia was alone and demanded she tell him where his godson was. Terrified for her life, she told him the name of the orphanage Vernon dropped the boy off at all those years ago. Raging, Sirius barely restrained from killing her. But with the orphanage in London that put him close to Grimmauld
Place. Making a stop there, he tidied up and demanded Kreature to fix up the house. With his father’s wand and the best clothes he could find/transfigure, Sirius walked into the orphanage with a purpose, emulating his father’s air of importance. By the time he walked out of the building, he had full custody of Harry in the Muggle World.

He knew, technically, he was the legal guardian of Harry, his status of godfather never having been revoked by Lily and James, and the Ministry unable to revoke it. With a few charming looks, he was able to discover that the orphanage was closing for good and that Harry was one of their last children to get sorted out because he had been at school all year. This was exactly what he needed. With Harry's custody in his hands and this place closing, there was no one to come looking for him. She told him that she had to make a few calls but he could pick Harry up in the afternoon. Sirius, hoping to have picked Harry up then and there, resigned himself to coming back later. He did have things to do, though.

//

Harry spends another week at the orphanage, Dot telling him about the home he was going to and how much he would like it there. He was running on autopilot, to be honest. He helped her sort through documents that needed to be filed to be picked up later. He swept through all the empty rooms one last time since he was the only child still there.

Sirius showed up when Harry was out buying more boxes for Dot. He talks with her and fills out the paperwork, only using a mild confundus charm when she wanted him to talk with the people going to take Harry in the next week. She told him that as long as everything checked out and Harry was okay with it, he could leave this afternoon.

Harry was informed that his godfather was adopting him. Harry wasn’t sure how that was but she told him that Mr. Black had been looking for him since his parent’s death and only now found him. Harry was skeptical. He wouldn’t put it past Riddle to try and get him from this place. He had complained about it enough to the Slytherin, it wouldn’t be a far guess for him to try and ‘save’ him. Dot explained to him that the man was his godfather and had provided the paperwork to prove it.

Harry grabbed the offered paper, able to see through the muggle glamour right away. It was christening papers and there, marked as godfather, was Sirius Black. There was no godmother listed Harry noted with a passing glance. What grabbed his interest was the signatures of his parents. The curvy loop of Lily Potter and the neat but slanted of James Potter.

Harry wasn’t sure, knowing that it could be another trap by Riddle but he saw no glamour on the documents and the papers looked over a decade old and even had the signature of the previous Minister of Magic.

He would leave it to Black to explain before he made his decision.

//

Unfortunately, since Harry was cut off from the magical world, he didn’t get the memo that there was an escaped convict.

Dumbledore thought he was safe where he was because Black would believe Harry was at his aunt’s house and would never look for him in London.

He was in for a surprise when he notified Petunia to be careful and got a sharp rebuke that she already told the freak where Harry was and to never grace her doorstep again. He apparated to the
orphanage just to see Black pulling out of a hug with Harry.

Wand out, he demanded he move away from Harry.

“Harry, get away from him!” Dumbledore demanded of the boy, shocking him as he had never seen this side of his Headmaster. “Sirius Black is an escaped convict from Azkaban. He is a follower of Voldemort.”

Harry took a step back from Black at that, distrust entering his eyes as he took the man in again. Nothing about him screamed, ‘Dark Lord Supporter’. He’d seen genuine kindness in every gesture and surely if he meant him harm, he wouldn’t have gone through the process of adopting him legally?

Sirius moved to defend himself from the accusation and Dumbledore lent half an ear but he also knew how good of a liar Sirius had been at school. “If you speak the truth, let Harry go and hand yourself over for proper questioning. This is what’s best for Harry.”

Sirius declined, knowing he would never be given a fair trial especially if he didn’t have Pettigrew. “I’m not holding Harry here. He is free to choose who he wants to go with.”

Merlin, he was trying to act like he wasn’t nervous as hell but he was really scared that Harry wouldn’t choose him, that he would take Dumbledore’s side. But he didn’t have to convince Albus of his innocence, only Harry. He begged him to give him a chance. He swore that nothing and no one would come before Harry.

Harry struggled, knowing what had happened the last time he had trusted someone. But he seemed so genuine and the documents and the story he had told…he couldn’t be making those up. And if he really was out to kill him, why go through all these loops to get custody of him?

So he took a chance and grabbed the tattooed hand, Sirius apparating them away before Dumbledore could stop them. He honestly hadn’t believed Harry would go with Sirius after what happened the past year, had been counting on that. Either Sirius had hoodwinked the boy or told him a very convincing story.

Dumbledore focused on the terrified Dot huddled in the corner and made his way over, smiling warmly at her as he walked through her mind to figure out just what Sirius Black was up to and if it had anything to do with Riddle.

///
Chapter 13

The horrible squeezing feeling didn’t last long before they appeared on a normal London street, in a normal London neighborhood.

Harry collapsed to his knees the second they landed, heaving up what little had been in his stomach. If that was apparating, he never wanted to do that again!

He threw a deadly look to the chuckling escapee who appeared unfazed by the feeling.

“You’ll get used to the sensation after a few goes. Most everyone vomits their first time.” There was laughter in Sirius’ eyes that quelled the anger and Harry took a moment to look at his surroundings and he found them similar to what he had grown up around leading him to believe they hadn’t ventured far from the orphanage.

Harry threw the man a bewildered look at what they were doing here, attempting to spit out what he could of the taste in his mouth.

Sirius held up a finger, a smile on his lips, pulling at his gaunt cheeks. Those were odd tattoos, Harry mused on what they might mean.

Harry turned forward, studying the houses to see if anything was out of place. It also gave him a moment to calm his raising heart and bury his doubts which had returned after he got his stomach under control.

It didn’t take him long to notice, having keen observation skills, “Where’s 12?”

Sirius held out his hand which Harry took with little hesitation. With a few mumbled words, Harry felt his mouth drop open in shock as 12 Grimmauld Place slide into place!

“It’s a wizard house!?”

He couldn’t keep the excitement out of his voice. He had only been to one magical house and he had wanted to see more, see how his pure-blood classmates lived. If it is the same as living at Hogwarts or if each house was different. Were there individual libraries? Special family tomes passed down with each generation? Magical kitchens or washrooms? Were there gardens of magical plants?

“Welcome to the ancestral home of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black.”

Harry’s eyes widened even further behind his glasses and he ran to the front door, eager to enter and explore. But he had to put his excitement on pause as his hand reached for the knob. He needed answers before he allowed himself to get lost in the wonder of the home.

Sirius followed behind him at a normal pace, pausing on the doorstep as well, to see what was on Harry’s mind.

“Why did Dumbledore think you were a Death Eater?” those sharp, familiar green eyes cut into him, demanding answers.
The outside world melted away, the man walking his dog on the sidewalk was ignored, the honking a street over was muffled. Standing on 12 Grimmauld Place doorstep, there was only them two.

Even though he knew it was a conversation they were going to have, Sirius still grew anxious. Anxious that Harry would have second thoughts and want to leave him. That he wouldn’t believe that he was innocent.

“I think we better go inside for that conversation.” Sirius pushed the door open, motioning for Harry to be silent as they walked through the entrance way and down into the kitchen, the only area he had deemed safe so far.

Harry followed with slight suspicion as he took in the darkness of the house and came to the conclusion that it definitely lived up to its Black name. There was no color anywhere and it looked like it had been vacant for at least a decade.

Harry took a seat as Sirius went to start a fire. His eyes scanned the walls, anywhere, everywhere. He wanted to know everything about this house and what was hidden away.

His attention was pulled back to his godfather who sat down across from him. He looked nervous and anxious, the light from the fire highlighting the gauntness of his face and just how emaciated he truly was. His skin looked like it was hanging off his bones, his eyes are sunken in with his cheekbones more pronounced than they normally would be. But there are features he can pick out that remind him of the radiant man he had seen in the Mirror of Erised back in his first year. The blacker than night hair, the stormy grey eyes, the smile that took up his entire face, and the love reflected in those eyes when they gazed upon him.

“Nothing I told you was a lie but I didn’t tell you everything. Dumbledore believed me to be a Death Eater because I as good as killed your parents.”

He watched his godson’s face scrunch up in confusion and a hint of betrayal, eyes looking down trying to figure out what he was talking about.

“Twelve years ago, I was the Secret Keeper for your parents. They’d gone into hiding months before when it was revealed Voldemort was after you. The war had taken a turn for the worse, we’d lost dozens of friends and allies and we were so sure there was a traitor amongst us. I had a bigger target than most because I was a blood traitor and had been disowned by my own mother when I was 16. All of my family was fighting for Voldemort. My cousin, Bellatrix, swore to kill me and wipe the stain from the family.”

Harry took in the information greedily. While there were a great many books written about the previous war, not many detailed such personal history and tragedy. As they say, history is written by the winners.

“After Marlene was killed, I didn’t think I’d survive the war – I’d bloody fight and take down every Death Eater I could! – but I had too big of a target. And I knew if I died, James and Lily… their secret would be exposed and I couldn’t let that happen. I convinced James to change Secret Keepers in October. I was the obvious choice of Secret Keeper so I could keep the attention off the real one. I convinced him to change it to Pettigrew! And he went crawling to his master and told them exactly where to find you!”

Sirius was visibly distraught, emotions flicking across his face and through his voice that Harry was feeling whiplash trying to decipher what his godfather was feeling.
“I knew something was wrong when I went to Pettigrew’s safe house and he wasn’t there, no signs of a struggle. I raced to Godric’s Hollow and I was too late. Your house was destroyed.”

**Flashback to Halloween 1981:**

A motorcycle roars in the distance, getting louder by the second. The flying vehicle hasn’t even skidded to a halt before the rider was jumping off and rushing into the half-destroyed house he had landed in front of.

Sirius Black was about to experience the worst 24-hours of his entire life. It began a half hour ago when he discovered his friend, Peter Pettigrew nowhere to be found. Fearing the worst, he flew his motorcycle the few miles to the Potter Cottage at Godric’s Hollow.

Rushing inside, processing but not acknowledging the broken off door, he collapsed at the sight of his best friend and brother motionless at the end of the entrance hall. A whine escaped his throat as his feet somehow closed the distance between them. Sirius let out a broken moan when he saw James didn’t even have his wand on him! His hands shook, trembling as they caressed the face he had long ago memorized. The broken glasses barely hanging onto the bridge of his nose as the lenses were littered with cracks.

No! No. He had to pull himself together! Lily and Harry weren’t down here so maybe they got out! Which meant until he found them, he had to keep himself from falling about.

Picking himself up, he wipes at his eyes, willing away the water leaking from them. His hand freezes over his left eye, body turning towards where creaking on the upper floor has grabbed his attention.

His wand is up in an instant and he is running upstairs, all pretense of a sneak attack leaving his mind at the thought of Harry and Lily in danger. He takes the steps three at a time, skipping over the squeaky fifth step that always annoyed James.

He comes to the first-floor landing, spell on the tip of his tongue when he sees the massive figure that could only be Hagrid, ducking out of Harry’s room.

They both star at each other, Hagrid eyeing the wand leveled at his chest while Sirius’ eyes are on the bundle in his arms.

He moves forward, hand hesitant at what lies in the bundle but all that leaves him when he hears the sniffling of his godson who begins to wiggle in the giant's arms until little green eyes are staring into grey.

Harry cries out a heart wrenching ‘mama’ and ‘dada’ and Sirius is reminded that the boy had only recently begun to speak those words discriminately, associating them with Lily and James.

Hagrid blocks his way, large arms bringing Harry further up and away from the one person he sought. Harry screams out for his godfather and Sirius demands Hagrid give him the boy.

“Give him to me, Hagrid! Give me Harry! I’m his godfather!”

Hagrid didn’t lower his arms, “’fraid I can’t do that. Dumbledore’s orders.”

Sirius grinds his teeth at Harry’s continued cries of distress, “I’m his godfather. That means Harry is to go into my legal custody in the event something should happen to his parents.”

He wanted to curse the giant for upsetting Harry even further. He knew that if he could just hold
the boy, he could calm him down. Bounce him on his hip as he hummed the Beatles off tune. But he couldn’t risk cursing the giant because he would never risk hitting Harry. Which meant he was at an impasse.

As the seconds ticked by and the giant refusing to relinquish Harry, Sirius knew what he had to do.

There was no telling how long it had been since the attack but the magic in the air was dissipating. Voldemort’s supporters could be making their way here right now and the most important thing was getting Harry to safety. And if Hagrid wasn’t going to give him up, then he had to trust that Dumbledore would keep him safe.

“Take my bike, it’ll be faster.” The twenty-one-year-old led the giant out of the house and to his motorcycle. Giving him a quick tutorial, he wondered how Hagrid had gotten here so fast and how he had known to come.

Those questions run through his mind as he watches the man fly off with his godson, feeling like he had made the biggest mistake and the hardest decision of his life.

He watched them until the tail light was nothing but a star in the sky before making his way back inside, stepping over James once again, his eyes refusing to look at the face he had seen almost daily for the last decade. But he needed to see what had happened in Harry’s room and reunite Lily with her husband.

He takes the steps one at a time this time, pushing away all images in his head of what could be up there.

His hand lands on the doorframe, feeling the splintered wood and taking in the complete disaster of a room. His stormy grey eyes were only looking for one thing and when they land on her crumpled body, he loses it. Everything he had been suppressing since he found James came tumbling out as he fell to his knees, hands hesitating over the still open eyes of his friend. Those same green eyes she shared with her son. And he once again questions if he did the right thing.

By the destruction and position of her body, he knew she had died protecting her son as they all would’ve. Lying in front of the half-destroyed crib, he knew Harry had watched her die. Killing those thoughts before they could grow, Sirius investigated the rest of the room from when he kneeled.

The upper part of the room was blown out opposite the crib. Was it a spell recoil? There were tattered robes off to the side that didn’t match anything Harry would have in his room; was it Voldemort and was he gone?

Putting all speculations aside, he breaths deeply through his nose and hoists Lily into his arms, carrying her carefully and gently down to her husband. They deserved to be together until he could get their revenge.

With a final vow, he disapparated from the house to Pettigrew’s mothers. For him, it was the most obvious place the little traitor would go now that his lord was dead and he had betrayed the Order. He would be looking for a safe place and his childhood home had always been that.

They were dead, James and Lily were dead. And Remus would never speak to him again, not after they suspected him of being the traitor. Harry was gone, whisked away by Dumbledore. His world was spiraling out of control the last three hours and the only thing he could do right was kill the rat. He would kill him for betraying them. He would kill him for sending the Dark Lord after Harry. He would kill him for making them believe, kind, gentle Remus was the traitor.
Peter Pettigrew wouldn’t see another sunrise.

Only, that’s not what happened. After tracking him down for four hours, he had finally cornered the traitor. He thought he would be able to kill him, no questions, but here at the end, he found himself unable to hold back. So he asked, asked why he had betrayed them to Voldemort? Why he had betrayed them, his brothers?

That had been his third mistake of the day. His first was sending Harry off with Hagrid and the second was not going to Remus and begging for forgiveness.

Peter took advantage of his moment of anguish and screamed at a volume Sirius had never heard him use before, claiming that he, Sirius, had betrayed James and Lily and that he, Peter, wouldn’t let him get away with it.

Mind whirling, no one ever claimed Sirius Black wasn’t intelligent, he came to the horrible conclusion on what Peter was trying to accomplish: he was trying to frame him. They knew no one outside the two of them now knew the Secret Keepers had been switched. If Sirius died, Peter could go back to the Order and they would be none the wiser, and if Peter died, there would be no one to confirm Sirius’s story and his innocence.

The Black fury raged inside him at the audacity of the little rat but he was already one step ahead of him. Wand subtly aimed behind him at the group of onlookers, Peter gave him one last smile of victory before casting his spell, disappearing in the chaos that followed.

And Sirius, well, he could do nothing but laugh, laugh at their foolishness, laugh at the unfairness, laugh that he was a dead man.

He felt nothing as the Aurors hauled him away, numb to the world, numb with the knowledge that he had failed, failed in everything he had set out to do and now Harry was all alone in the world.

He was rotting in a cell in Azkaban Prison before the sun even set and there he would continue to be numb to the world until a particular news article captured his attention eleven years and seven months later.

Chapter End Notes

I did not mean to take a six month break but I entered my final semester of grad school and had to focus on finishing up my projects and research paper. There were tears, sleepless night, one -maybe two- breakdowns but now I have officially graduated!

I outlined year three and part of year four around the beginning of June so I have a clear direction on where I want to go which should make it easier to start updating again but be warned, I have been jumping around my stories the last month.
Harry stared at the man he had only known for a few hours yet had revealed the very thing he didn't realize he desired to know.

This new information, to hear how it was he had come into the Dursley's care, that someone had tried to avenge his parents…

The sound of the chair scraping against the tile echoed throughout the room as Harry moved, pacing around the kitchen as he tried to gather his thoughts, glancing back to Sirius before running his hand through his messy hair.

It was Dumbledore that had left him at the Dursley's. Dumbledore! The age-old anger resurfaced at finally knowing the truth and he had to pause as searing pain emitted from the mark on his neck that was still covered. Hand clapping against it, as if it would help dull the pain.

Sirius, who had been following Harry's movements intently, immediately noticed the change and was at his godson's side, removing the bandages against heavy protest.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut tightly, not wanting to see the hate and disgust he knew would cross his face when he finally looked upon what a mistake he was, how messed up and damaged his godson was.

Sirius' hands were cold to the touch as they gently unwrapped the bandages, pale face becoming even paler as the blackness of a mark slowly revealed itself. It didn't take a genius to connect who the mark belonged to and who had likely placed it on his little godson.

"Merlin," his voice shook at the weight of this knowledge. He had been unable to protect his godson, the most important person in his life. He thought by breaking out of prison, he could protect Harry but it seems that he was too late. Why was he always too late to save those he loved?!

Harry's head shot up at the shakiness in the other's voice, eyes widening in disbelief that Sirius wasn't pushing him away.

Green met grey, "We'll fix this," the scratchy voice assured the younger who tried so hard to keep a blank face, to not get his hopes up. It was a valiant effort that failed at the sincerity of the man in front of him. All Harry could do in response was nod his head in broken relief as Sirius pulled him
into his tight embrace and Harry thought for a moment Sirius believed he could put all the broken pieces together with the strength of his embrace alone.

This time he wouldn't fail. He would be there for Harry and make sure nothing ever happened to him again.

Depending on who you asked, some people would be surprised to know that Sirius Black was well versed in dark magic. Those were the people who knew him in passing from his Hogwarts days where he declared war on anything Dark, including his family. But it was precisely that reason he knew so much about the dark arts. His family was old magic, believers in the old ways and had raised him in such beliefs.

It was from this alone, he knew there may be something helpful in the family library which is where you could frequently find both the inhabitants of Grimmauld Place as they worked to clean out the decade of disuse and decay.

Harry had pulled out a book at random the first day cleaning, flicking carelessly through the pages, seeing if anything caught his eye. It was a picture that gave him pause and swiftly flip back to the page, almost cutting open his fingers in his haste.

He was equal parts horrified and transfixed in what his eyes devoured. He had known there would be some questionable books and artifacts in this house, knowing the history of the Black Family but it was a completely different sensation when actually confronted with how dark some of the subjects were this library held. The book in his hand detailed gruesome rituals that had been outlawed for centuries and were probably forgotten about by the rest of the world. He felt a jolt of desire at this realization, the Ravenclaw in him awakening at this accessibility to forgotten knowledge.

When he showed the book to Sirius and inquired if all the books were of similar nature, the man only shrugged and told him the Black's had always considered themselves above the law and the home had been in the family for centuries, accumulating wealth and knowledge as time went on with each generation. It was hard to say what exactly was in this library anymore.

It was a few days later when Sirius decided to broach the topic that had lead to him breaking out of Azkaban.

"Was she your friend?"

Harry paused in his browsing of book titles, contemplating if he should answer. He hadn't spoken her name since leaving Hogwarts, hadn't talked to anyone about what had happened. But Sirius was showing he wasn't like the other adults. He was making the effort that had been lacking his entire life. So he answered without turning around.

"Yes."

How could words describe just what Ginny meant to him? How she had saved him in more ways than one? Taught him that it was okay to open yourself up to others? Taught him to laugh and smile? To be a kid?

It turns out, he didn't need to say all that for Sirius to understand the weight of that one word.

"Not a day goes by that I don't miss Jams and Lily."
Harry doesn't respond. He's intelligent enough to realize what Sirius is trying to do and if he's stubborn enough, the subject may just drop itself.

"I'm haunted by my actions and know I'm responsible for their deaths. I couldn't even avenge them properly; Pettigrew's still out there."

Did he know? Did he know what happened in the Chamber or was he truly speaking from experience? It was like listening to a parallel version of himself as an adult.

He was learning there were layers to Sirius Black that were slowly being peeled back just as he began to look more and more human as he gained weight and regular sleep.

All his life, people had told him to be grateful, that things could be worse, that he was lucky, that they understood his pain. But it was all a lie. Things adults told him to make themselves feel like they were doing something so they could sleep peacefully at night. It was placating lie after lie. He had thought coming to Hogwarts would stop this cycle but the professors were all the same. Not asking questions, ignoring the obvious, hiding behind the façade that everything was okay so they could think better of themselves. They could tell themselves that they had tried to help poor orphan Harry Potter. It was the same act over and over.

But Sirius was different. He knew – Harry knew he knew – his dark past and he didn't stop there. He wanted to help and worst of all, he understood. He took him as he was and wanted him.

"It's my fault she was there that night. I could've gone to a professor sooner and stopped all of it. I just, I thought he was my friend." Harry rested his hand on the worn pages of the book in front of him, trying to will away the images of that night, explaining his feelings as detached as possible. "I couldn't save her, she died because I wasn't strong enough. And sometimes, sometimes I wish Fawkes had left the Basilisk venom kill me."

A tattooed hand met his and Harry followed the markings until they disappeared under moth-eaten sleeves.

"And then all their sacrifices would have been for nothing. The ones we love never truly leave us," the hand moved to his chest, right over his heart and Harry felt it skip a beat, "They're here. If you ever think you're alone, remember that and they'll be with you, always."

His lips trembled and he swallowed down the cries that wanted to escape.

"None of it was your fault. You're just a kid, the professors should've protected you. Dumbledore should've protected you."

Harry finally met Sirius' gaze, pale cheeks pushed back as his face contorted in anguish at those words. It was the first time someone had told him that, that the world wasn't on his shoulders. That he didn't have to always be the one fighting.

He fell into the embrace that was becoming increasingly familiar and the tattooed hand brushed up his neck until it made contact with his head of wild hair, gently cradling it as he brought it to rest against his chest, caressing it in soothing motions.

Sirius knew the consequences of keeping these feelings buried and he didn't want Harry to experience that kind of hurt. He didn't want Harry to turn into him, the shell of a broken man.

The fire spits and crackles in the background, the only light in the dark house of his ancestors, providing no warmth to the two occupants. It was suffocating being back here where his life had been nothing but hell for sixteen years. It was a necessity, it was only temporary.
"Filthy blood traitors! Dishonouring the memory of Kreacher's poor mistress. Worthless son returning after breaking mistress' heart. Scum, filth…Kreacher does not want to serve him but Kreacher must. Kreacher lives to serve the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black," the furious mumbling echoed through the room from the open door. "Harry Potter, vanquisher of the Dark Lord, spawn of blood traitors and Mudbloods."

"Kreacher!" Sirius roared as he moved away from Harry, intent on killing the damned house-elf once and for all – except, he couldn't move! Looking down at what was obstructing him, Sirius found Harry's hands in an iron grip, tangled in his shirt.

Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, Sirius forced himself to relax. He couldn't run forward without thinking anymore, not when that was the reason they were in this situation in the first place. He had to be rational. He had someone who depended on him now.

But could he really do this? He had never been good at the emotional stuff. That had always been Remus. Kind, compassionate, patient Mooney.

The mutterings of the mad house-elf faded as he continued his haunt elsewhere for the time being.

"Did you know, I ran away from here when I was 16? One night, I had enough and I just left." Merlin, he remembered that night like it was yesterday. "There was one place I was always welcome…your dad's. Your grandparents became like parents to me and I went back every summer until we graduated."

Sirius felt movement as Harry pushed himself away and releasing his grip, awkwardly trying to compose himself so he could listen to the story, wanting to hear everything he could about the people he knew nothing about.

The light still flickered from the fire but finally, the warmth began to seep into their bodies and for the first time in decades, laughter filtered through the empty spaces of Grimmauld Place, bringing back echoes of two little boys tucked away late at night, the younger collapsed into muffled giggles as the older looked on in triumph. But those were ghosts long buried to the cruel reality of their world, a world that was not kind to children.

There was an ease about them now, Harry was still hesitant but he could see the cracks forming.

With the knowledge that the Ministry couldn't track magic done under this roof, Harry took to that greedily. The few weeks of being unable to perform any magic having created an itch that he desperately wanted to scratch.

He had every spell he had learned the last two years at the tip of his tongue ready to use. Cleaning the house, making it habitable was a momentous task and he was ready to help in any way he could.

Harry looked to Sirius when he performed his first grey – dark-leaning – spell to removes a horde of doxies that had moved into one of the studies. He waited for a reaction, preparing himself for the worst…but all he received was a raised eyebrow before the man continued on with the task at hand.

Harry took that for the acceptance it was and continued with his spell work, a noticeable smile lighting up his eyes as another barrier was taken down. Every day that went by, he became surer and surer he had made the correct decision to take his godfather's hand.

Sirius was amazed at how advanced Harry was, knowing spells from fifth and sixth-year
curriculums. Lily had always been intelligent and James never bothered applying himself in school so it wasn't too much of a shock that their son was a hardworking genius. Then, there was the fact he was in Ravenclaw.

Harry only shrugged awkwardly, "I like to read."

Which wasn't a lie but it also wasn't the full truth as Riddle had taught him many of these spells. He didn't want to think about that now, didn't want to think about him.

Sirius took the flow of the conversation to learn more about Harry.

"What else d'you like to do?"

It gave Harry pause, taking him away from those thoughts and he began to think about what it was he liked to do. He hadn't been able to do what he liked for years so he never really figured it out but he felt like he was slowly beginning to find himself. There was one thing he didn't have to think about before spitting it out with a face-splitting smile, "Quidditch!"

Sirius shared his energy and probably doubled it when he learned that Harry was a Seeker and demanded to be regaled with play-by-play of each of his games.

The day dissolved into the sharing of Quidditch stories where for every game Harry told, Sirius would recreate one of his father's until Harry had none left and listened intently, captivated, to all the games Sirius remembered.

He felt warm and light at all this new information, confirmation that he was more alike to his parents than he ever knew.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!